

Identifying the Continuing Disparities: The Mission of the Commission Needs to be Completed

The following is a transcription of the opening address delivered by former President Bill Clinton at the “Kerner Plus 40” Symposium, February 28 in Irvine Auditorium. Sponsored by Penn’s Center for Africana Studies and Annenberg School for Communication and by the Institute for Advanced Journalism Studies at North Carolina A&T University, “Kerner Plus 40” marks the 40th anniversary of the 1968 report.

Thank you very much and good morning. President Gutmann, thank you for the introduction and 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 at 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 embarrassing you. And my neighbor in Chautauque, New York, David Helfenbein (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, why President Johnson asked them to meet and what 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 towards two societies, one black, one white, separate and unequal had, but still the political will to act on it could not be mustered, because of the heart-break and division and anger of the country. And of course 1968 was one of the most tumultuous years of the 20th century for 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, embraced the spirit and the substance of 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 those 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 African Americans; it includes Hispanic Americans and many other first generation im-

migrants. But it leaves in its wake a quieter riot of disillusionment and despair born of the disparities 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, go down 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 airtight 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 my office is, in many other places large 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 long for an America of shared prosperity, shared 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 races and religions into our political life is something 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 into the schoolhouse in 1957. Like any 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, the assassinations of Dr. King and President Kennedy and Bobby Kennedy. We have to say 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 television stars, or movie stars, 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. In education, incarceration, in health care, in employment, incomes and in wealth. The poverty rate in black America is still three times what it is for whites. The unemployment rate is still double that for whites. While we have had seven years of alleged economic growth, most Americans believe they’re in a recession. And I thought about this in the last few weeks when there has been all this huge debate about the stimulus package passed by Congress designed to avert a recession. And they were wonderful debates, fascinating to a policy wonk like me, you know, was there enough money in it, was it being spent in the right ways, if you sent out all these refund checks would people spend them or save them or just pay down their credit card bills? More important, could it all be blown away by home mortgage meltdown with two million fellow citizens and their families on the street? But as I thought about it more, most Americans already think they are in a recession, because they’re broke every month. And the reason is not far to see. This decade has produced flat wages against exploding costs for health care, for higher education, for utilities, for gasoline, for all the things related to energy. Food now rising at nearly twice the rate of inflation, which will, I predict, sometime within the coming year substantially increase the hunger problem in urban cities and small rural areas in America. So if there is a recession, it will hit especially hard on those who believe they have not escaped one. In the first five years of this

decade, we don’t really have good data for the rest, 40% of the growth was generated by housing. And the rest was mostly maxed out credit cards and second mortgages on homes, driving consumer spending. So the idea of balanced growth was impossible. Over 90% of the benefits of this decade have gone to the top 10 percent of income earners. And since there is a racial profile to the structure of income earners, there had to be a racial disparity in that fact. Over 40% of those 90% benefits went to the top 1%, a big percentage of that to the top one-tenth of 1%.

And public policy is very different now, we have given people in that income group, I love saying this because I’m in that group now. But when I went to the White House, my family had the lowest net worth of any first family in a hundred years. Going back to the entire 20th century, I don’t think they calculated it before then, but if you adjust it for inflation, we were the poorest family to move in the White House in a hundred years. And when we left we were poorer still. But as soon as I made money, with all of these poor people in America, with all these education and health needs, with our soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq, the government started giving me a tax cut every year, so the policies of this decade have reinforced this inequality and it had a racially disparate impact even if they didn’t intend to. We just have to face that. But if you want to look at where we go now from what the Kerner Commission said we have to look at the conditions of daily life. The conditions are even worse among those 24 or 28 million Americans who are, disproportionately, people of color who get a check every two weeks or every month but don’t have a bank account, therefore don’t have a credit rating, therefore don’t have an ATM card, and have to use alternative financial services like these payday loans and tax refund anticipation loans, which can have real effective interest rates at between 40 and 400% a year and cost people who already can’t pay their hundreds of bills, sometimes even almost \$2,000 dollars a year more in just paying to operate in this economy. So we have to look at these things and unpack them. If you really want to ask, the only question that matters: What does the spirit, what do the values of the recommendation of the Kerner Commission report tell us about what we have to do today? I wouldn’t spend five minutes celebrating the progress—not with this much inequality, not 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 in 2001 was about what could be done, what had to be done still 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 let me 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

the past for any reason other than to prove that government policy can make a difference, let me just point out some of the differences between this decade and the previous one, when I had the privilege to serve, because it will explain why this inequality problem has gotten so much worse and why there is a clear racial element to it. For African Americans, yes, but also for Hispanic Americans and for many others. In the nineties we had 22.9 million new jobs in this economy, in this decade, 5 million. In the nineties 7.7 million people moved from poverty into the middle class—one hundred times as many people that moved from poverty to the middle class in the Reagan years, in that expansion.

In this decade, 5 million people have fallen from the middle class into poverty. And that decade family income went up about \$7,500, after inflation. African American incomes went up \$8,600 dollars, after inflation. In this decade, median family income has fallen \$1,000 after inflation, while health care costs have doubled, college education up 75% and all the other expenses. We had the lowest African American and Hispanic unemployment rates ever recorded. And there was a third reduction in child poverty rate among African Americans, the lowest rate since 1978 for all children. Did the government have anything to do with it? That's the important thing. What public policies should you advocate?

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 because every year my foundation has 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, figure out how to increase and simplify and make automatic the earned income tax credit, and you will lift a lot more people out of poverty and close some of those gaps. We doubled childcare, which enabled more people at low incomes to go to work, without giving up their responsibilities as parents, more than doubled, increase transportation, had 200,000 housing vouchers for poor people so they could move from welfare to work and move close to the job, because a lot of them did not even own cars. And if you keep people isolated in where they can live and they can't get around, you are going to have these disparities persist, particularly in urban areas if the jobs are growing in one area and the people are living in another. We got more private investment in 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 in America rather like the one that won the Nobel Prize for Muhammad Yunus, a couple of years ago.

And, maybe most important of all and least understood for the first time our administration 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 neighborhoods. Over \$800 billion was invested by banks, under the Community Reinvestment Act. Again I will say it's a law that had been on the books since the 1970s, that was 95% of all the money ever invested under that law. There was a law on the books; all we 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-

ey, they have 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 not 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. And one of the most heartening aspect 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 there are simple things that can be done. For example, why shouldn't the government return to an aggressive effort to loan money directly at low interest rates instead of letting private loan companies with federal insurance charge kids up to 20% for their college 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 to pay the loans off 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. One of the worst things that happened when 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 at 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 in prisons throughout 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 of the absence of Government Action.

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 while they're in prison, and because of cutbacks in 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 between crack cocaine and powder cocaine 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 people but they went in when they were 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 in the entire United States, it's the 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 you 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 admonitions of the Kerner Commission? Give everybody 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 systematic one-on-one way, and every one of these 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 once 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 have health care reform that provides affordable health care to everybody. And that is also significant because we are never going to fix this economy and reduce the growing inequality unless we get a hold of health care costs and almost every health economist will tell you that you can't control the cost unless you have complete coverage and much dramatically simplified big insurance pools.

So I believe that government policy matters. I think the experience in my administration proves that it does. I think the experience in these seven years proves that it does. But I also believe there are many things we can do in the absence of government policy. I try to do what I can with some things that are fairly minor but I work with the American Heart Association and a lot of other partners trying to address the single most important health care problem for African Americans and for other people of color right now—the rising tide of diabetes among young people. That is a side effect of the rising tide of childhood obesity. We are at risk at raising the first generation of young Americans to live shorter lives than their parents and if it happens, it will be led by people of color.

Pacific Islanders and Native Americans are 2.1 times as likely as European Americans to develop diabetes as children or young adults given a constant rate of diet and exercise, good or bad; African Americans, 1.8 times as likely, Hispanic Americans, 1.7 times as likely—for genetic reasons not yet fully understood. Now this is something we can all help on. But I worry that we may start generating jobs again, figure out how to create investment opportunities in the inner cities again, oppose a lot of these economic disparities as we did in the nineties again and have it all blown up because children of color will be going around blind or with amputated limbs or dramatically shortened life expectancies. And you don't have to have the government to have an aggressive mission there, to do something yourself to help to close the gap. We gotta do something to get these 28 million Americans who aren't in the banking system in the banking system. You can't pass a law in order for that to be done. Every place, this university, and every other major institution with connections in the community can take the leadership in banking the unbanked, with regular income and teaching them the basics of how to manage their money. We are aggravating the color divide because African Americans and Hispanics are disproportionately represented in the unbanked. And you don't have to have the government to do that.

So I will close with this thought. The whole world today is in a struggle between competing forces that drive us together and take us apart. As a function of our interdependence we cannot escape each other. Our interdependence makes us

more vulnerable to terror and more able to enjoy the most colossal feast of interconnections that human beings have ever experienced. Our interdependence makes it possible for us to work together to generate wealth and opportunity. But if we continue on the same energy course we will also interdependently burn the planet up for our children and grandchildren. And our interdependence means that we all make money as a result of each other's activity, but when the rewards to capital and education so outweigh the rewards to labor that if you have the wrong government policies, you're going to actually crush people who are low on the education and capital scale and high on the labor capacity scale, you're going to have all the problems the Kerner Commission talked about. And the last thing I want to say about it is, we should not have to have a riot in the streets to do the right things. We should not punish people for being law-abiding citizens by ignoring their problems. And so, I will just close with this. It happens that if we think about the big things, how to make the world's interdependence, which we cannot reverse, a positive, not a negative force. It will lead us to the right things.

I sound like a broken record and I saved this to the end so that I'll only talk two minutes instead of 20 on it. If you look at every wealthy country in the world, the only countries that are producing more jobs with higher incomes and declining inequalities are those which have made a serious commitment to energy independence and fighting global warming through clean energy and energy efficiency. That course creates jobs in every rural area, every small town, every suburb, and every big city. That course creates jobs for all college graduates in the related fields and for high school dropouts who could be trained to retrofit every building on the University of Pennsylvania campus. It is the only course we can pursue that will address the economic inequality that was at the core of what the Kerner Commission saw coming 40 years ago. Forty years ago it was assumed that if you just had the right government aid policies, you know, job-creating policies, or education in training policies, we had a self-contained economy and everything would be alright. And so those of us who were alive and looking at it at that time said, it's really too bad the politics messed it up because if we could have just done the right things there, created the job programs and the investment programs, we could have solved it. You cannot do that anymore because of the interdependent economy. On the other hand, you do have the closest thing we will ever have to a silver bullet for the income disparity, job disparity, wealth-creating disparity problem. A new energy policy that will provide jobs for every person at every educational level, in this city and throughout America. And you just have to look at the other rich countries that have done it and you will see. They are only ones that, in this decade, have built a new future that embraced everyone. So I ask you to think about these things. Think about what you want the government to do, don't be under any illusion that government policy doesn't make a difference. It does. But also don't be under any illusion that you have to sit around and wait for the government to make a difference. You don't. The fundamental mission of the Kerner Commission still needs to be completed. It's as alive and relevant today as it ever was, and it always will be as long as we live in a country which is foolish enough to deny some of its people the ability to live to the fullest of their God-given ability. Thank you very much.



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 national disasters like Katrina often bring to 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. They say look at 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 way better in politics and culture than we have done on the ground. And that there 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 story in the last few months where actually 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 there is still dramatic economic 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. How does that movement back to the center 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 etiological righting of the Republican Party, where the 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 there is a lot more awareness, also of 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 run this 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 progressive 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 got elected, he could still ride on 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, the United States, 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 now 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 20 years?

WC: Well I think first the senates 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 need to get rid of the disparity. 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 model that was born in Miami under Janet Reno when she was a prosecutor called the Drug Courts, which would allow large numbers of people who would otherwise had 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 a serious effort to keep more people out of jail in the first place who don't do violent offenses. And then if you reduce the sentencing disparities, and you have an exit strategy, which I talked about in my talk, I think all these things would make a difference. If you have any other ideas, I'd like to have them, but I think that we basically were traumatized in the early eighties by the violence associated with the rise of selling drugs in a more organized, commercially effective way by gangs, some of which were affiliated with larger organized crime groups. And we got into the notion that everybody involved in that area should go to prison, including people who were first time users or not drug dealers of any significance or anything and we just put too many people in jail. So we need to change the idea that we have to send so many people to jail and realize that a huge percentage of the violent crime in this country, the dangerous crime, is committed by a small percentage, not of the population, but a small percentage of the criminals. And yet we sentence with a shotgun instead of a rifle and I think that this is going to take a lot of re-thinking. I also think there should be an aggressive effort to pass federal legislation to restore voting rights to people as soon as they get out of jail. This is something I think would be important because again, we forget how many of these people who are in prison are there for the second time. We could lower the prison population a lot if you just stopped recidivism. So those are just some of the things that I think. I'm not sure I have the best ideas on this anymore. I've become obsessed with trying to help people who get out start again. That's something that in my current life I could have some impact on. But for the coming elections I think these questions should be asked and answered by everyone. Its simply, well, you said it—the consequences in this country would be devastating. You would never overcome a lot of these divisions, these disparities, unless you can enable African Americans to build strong families, have strong connections to the community, have strong jobs and you can't do it if we are essentially warehousing a generation of young people and when they come out we do nothing to try to help them to reintegrate into the society. And there are all kinds of other corollary consequences including a rise in HIV/AIDS infection among young women of color in our society, the genesis of which, by and large, is in prisons. So I think it's very important. And I guess, rath-

er than give you a very good answer, because I can't. I'm doing the best I can. I can say that I'm prepared to spend a significant portion of whatever life I've got left on this earth trying to fix this because I think it's a cancer for us. I just think its terrible and I think that we should all be doing it, whatever policies I would be happy to advocate any other policies if someone would explain to me what they should be. I would give you the best answers I can.

DW: Mr. President, let me ask you in follow up to Tukufo's question. Again you may recall that in 1997 we asked you a question about the gap between sentencing for crack and powder cocaine and the sentencing commission at that time was considering what to do and you said that you supported a reduction in that gap. Are you now concerned, or do you now regret that you did not move more aggressively to eliminate that disparity?

WC: Yes, but let me remind you... The short answer is yes. I wish I would have tried even though I think I would have had my head handed to me because of the Congress, you know, can reverse what the sentencing commission wants to do. And when I said that we should close the gap, the leading Republican, the committee chairman of the Senate agreed we should close the gap, we'll just raise the minimum sentences for powder cocaine up to what they were for crack. And I think he was trying to call my bluff and at the time there was this argument which turned out to be largely a canard really. That the sentences should be longer for crack because there was more violence associated in its sale and distribution and the maintenance of the networks. And like I said, it all grew up out of an emotional reaction to the death of Len Bias, who for the young people in the audience was the greatest basketball player of his age, and who probably would have been like LeBron James or Michael Jordan and he just died like that and it was traumatic. We even had people in the African American community saying we've gotta stomp this out and beat this down. And then once the law and order crowd took over Congress, we could never move away from it. So yeah, I wish I would have done more, but I don't think if we had tried, even if the sentencing commission had done more than it did I think the Congress probably would have flipped it.

TZ: Well, it seems that some of the nature of the problems has an institutional dimension to it, that is, many of the poorest people are locked in a kind of poverty and have less opportunities. And they also compose the population which is most likely to be imprisoned, so what kind of policies, what kind of actions can be taken to turn this tide, because it doesn't seem to have been stemmed and there is not a general conversation about doing that?

WC: Well, one of the things that I should have said in response to your previous question because it must have sounded like a dodge. You said what about the racial disparities in the arrest and sentencing laws. We have a Civil Rights Division and this is not my idea and I'm not saying anything political today but Hilary gave me this idea. She said you know what we should have is a Civil Rights Division that should have to work with the criminal division of the justice department and they should work with the local prosecutors and go through this and actually amass data on the patterns of sentencing, of prosecution and sentencing, that if there appears to be racial disparity, you go in and examine what the facts of it are and try to see if you can eliminate it in

an aggressive way. If it is not justified, that is, if you have a gang that mowing people down by the dozens that's a different story, but I think that we have never seen the pattern of prosecution and incarceration as a civil rights issue as much as we should have and its something that the way the next president could get into this, or the way the federal government could get into this is 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 do training sessions and work sessions and I 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 both 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 it has to be this way or 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 oversight by the Civil Rights Division, involvement 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 more diverse. There are more women 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. That if we didn't have so many immigrants, they would have jobs and their incomes would be higher. Then you see poor people who are, 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 multiracial, 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 its wonderful and exciting and it's a better way to live. The purpose of government policy and private action should be to take all the people that are underneath looking up at it, suffocating and let them move up into it.