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Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, September 25, 1997

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September 25, 1997, Thursday

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HEADLINE: A 'haunting but hopeful moment' Clinton recalls how '57 crisis affected him

BYLINE: TERRY LEMON AND JANE FULLERTON, **ARKANSAS** DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE Copyright 1997,
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BODY:

WASHINGTON -- As he prepared to mark 40 years since **Central High** School's desegregation, President Clinton said Wednesday the anniversary will help **Arkansas** soothe the scars of history and help the nation move toward a "new racial reality."

"This doesn't open old wounds, it heals them," Clinton said in an interview with the **Arkansas** Democrat-Gazette on the eve of his speech from the steps where nine black students entered Central under the guard of Army paratroopers in 1957.

"The 40th anniversary of **Central High** is not a signal that every problem that is related to race has been resolved in our state or our nation," the former **Arkansas** governor said, "but it is clearly an occasion for marking what was a watershed event that has led to greater integration, greater opportunity ... in the ensuing 40 years throughout our country."

The president, who was an 11-year-old student in Hot Springs in 1957, returned to **Little Rock** on Wednesday afternoon to participate in ceremonies marking the anniversary.

Beforehand, he reflected on his memories of what happened at Central four decades ago this month, how those events became "the single most formative experience of my childhood" and, ultimately, how they helped shape his political views.

Clinton also lamented that the political fallout from his presidency has caused damage in his home state but insisted **Arkansas** is better off since he took office.

"I think the state came out of it ahead," he said, pointing to such things as increased visibility, a stronger economy and the service of Arkansans who followed him to Washington.

"But I think that **Arkansas** was subject to some blows that it never would have been if I had been from Illinois or Ohio or someplace more familiar to the people who wrote about the presidency," he said. "And I regret that very much."

But most of the president's comments, in a 20-minute telephone interview that came between a pair of speeches in Pittsburgh, focused on his thoughts about race in general and Central in particular.

On the one hand, Clinton said, "it might have been better for **Arkansas**" if the events that unfolded had "never happened at all."

He noted that **Arkansas** had been "the first Southern state of the old Confederacy to integrate our university system" and that other school districts in the state already had integrated after the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision in Brown vs. Board of Education.

In that atmosphere, he said, if state and community leaders had simply followed through with the court's mandate for equal education, "we might have gotten through it without a crisis."

On the other hand, the upheaval that ensued may have had positive ramifications in the long run, Clinton said.

"I think the traumatic effect of **Little Rock** probably made Arkansans for years thereafter more sensitive about the whole range of racial issues than they might have otherwise been," he said, "and at least in the '70s and '80s perhaps more progressive than they might otherwise have been."

Problems still exist, the president acknowledged, "but on the whole, our state bore the scars of **Little Rock** in a positive way and moved forward and beyond that."

Despite the wrenching turmoil that followed Central's desegregation, Clinton said, the time was clearly ripe to admit black students since the stage had been set by federal- and state-court rulings striking down the notion of separate-but-equal schools.

"It was inevitable that people would seek those rights," he said. "Once those kids were willing to pay the price, and their parents were willing to pay the price, and **Daisy Bates** and L.C. Bates and all the others were willing to pay the price, the die was cast."

The president offered particular praise for civil rights pioneers **Daisy Bates**, 82, who will be honored at today's ceremonies, and her late husband, L.C. Bates. The couple published **Little Rock's** black newspaper, the State Press, and shepherded the nine black students as they sought to attend classes at Central.

Although he stopped short of naming names, Clinton placed much of the responsibility for what happened on **Arkansas'** leaders at the time, noting that President Eisenhower "did the right thing" by sending in troops from the 101st Airborne to enforce the desegregation order.

He pointed to similarities in other areas where ethnic tensions have fueled violence and civil unrest, such as Bosnia, Northern Ireland and the Middle East.

In Bosnia in particular, the president said, it was the country's leaders who "fueled the latent fires of racial hatred."

"I don't want to compare what Gov. [Orval] Faubus did to anything in any way to what happened in Bosnia," he said carefully. But, he continued, "community leaders and people with the legal authority to act have to decide whether they're going to pay the price to gamble for unity or reap the benefits of division in the short run. It's almost always wrong to choose the short-run benefits of division."

Central has clearly been on Clinton's mind as he prepares to deliver his first major speech on race relations since starting a year-long initiative on the topic in June. He has spent months brushing up on his history, reading old copies of **Little Rock's** newspapers -- the **Arkansas** Democrat and the **Arkansas** Gazette -- and Time magazine, then passing them on to his speech writers.

Clinton will be joined on the steps of Central by the **Little Rock** Nine -- the students who integrated the school -- as well as a number of Cabinet members, senior Clinton administration officials,

members of the president's advisory board on race, and state and local officials. Today's speech will be the centerpiece of a four-day presidential visit to **Arkansas**.

Discussing trade Wednesday morning at a gathering of the AFL-CIO in Pittsburgh, Clinton inserted a few references to the Central anniversary.

He told the labor leaders he would be going home to **Arkansas** "to focus our nation on a haunting but hopeful moment in our country's struggle to make America the nation live up to America the idea. ... I will honor the courage and vision of those whose eyes were fixed on the prize of equal educational opportunity without regard to race."

In his interview with the Democrat-Gazette, Clinton recounted his own vivid memories of the events of 40 years ago -- the recollections of an 11-year-old attending segregated schools in Hot Springs, 50 miles from **little Rock**.

"It's all anyone talked about for weeks," he recalled, "even young people that normally don't pay any attention to developments in the larger world. ... All the schoolchildren were caught up in it because it was not only the leading story and it was about race, but it was also about our schools. And everybody was arguing it and taking their sides and talking about what it meant."

Clinton, 51, acknowledged that his views on race were shaped by his upbringing in the segregated South -- and by his family. During his childhood in Hope, Clinton lived with his grandparents, who ran a grocery store on Hazel Street that was among the most integrated establishments in Hempstead County.

"My grandfather had a little grocery store; most of his customers were black," Clinton said. "And I hung around the store and played with kids when they came in and talked to people."

As he grew older, the battle over desegregation at Central became a pivotal event for him, he said.

"The **Little Rock** experience and the whole integration fight ... it was sort of the single most formative experience of my childhood," he said.

Later, as a Georgetown University student home for Christmas break, Clinton recalled, he would "just drive to the Delta and ride around, by myself, drive through the country roads and look at the sharecroppers' shacks they were living in, try to figure out what was still going on, what else we had to do."

As a result, he said, he pledged to himself that he would work to improve the standing of blacks in society.

"It probably all really began with **Little Rock**, because I think before that I had never had to come to grips with the unnatural pattern of segregation that existed even in my own life," he said. "And I thought it was enough if I was nice to everybody without regard to their race. And I think my sort of coming of awareness ... of this really began with **Little Rock**. By the time I was in college, it was kind of the driving passion of my life and my concern for political activity."

Now, as a president elected with the overwhelming support of the black community, Clinton has started a year-long initiative aimed at improving race relations. Although he is realistic about the prospects for eradicating racism -- "perfection may not be possible" -- he believes it is "possible for people to live together in an atmosphere of genuine respect."

"The trick for us is to deal with our old, unfinished business and recognize a completely new racial reality that will come to dominate the 21st century as we become ever more multiracial, multiethnic, multireligious and still say the most important thing is we're Americans," he said.

The racial makeup of the nation is changing so quickly, Clinton said, "this country is exploding in its diversity."

"It's a terrific advantage in a global economy, a global society, a world where we want to be a leading force for peace and prosperity," he said. "But it's an advantage only if we can learn to live and work together, which means we have to work on both the unfinished business between white and black America and try to create a country in which we can come together with far greater diversity than anyone could've imagined 40 years ago at **Little Rock**."

GRAPHIC: Photos by Rick McFarland, **Arkansas** Democrat-Gazette

President Clinton hugs state Treasurer Jimmie Lou Fisher on Wednesday afternoon while greeting friends at **Little Rock** National Airport, Adams Field, after arriving for a four-day visit. Clinton returned to **Little Rock** to participate in ceremonies marking the 40th anniversary of the integration of **Central High** School.

President Clinton (right) and his stepfather, Dick Kelley, stand arm-in-arm Wednesday while talking to Clinton's cousin, Lisa Cornwell, after the president's arrival at the **Little Rock** National Airport, Adams Field. Clinton is visiting his home state for four days.

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DRAFT

Radio Actuality Text

On salmon protection and the budget

November 5, 1999

Today I announce the expansion of a wildlife refuge to protect prime salmon habitat along the Columbia River.

restore salmon habitat and implement this important treaty.
~~While~~ ^{at} ~~my~~ ^{additional funding} budget proposes ^{has provided only a fraction of the funds} increases for salmon restoration, Congress is slashing funding for recovery efforts and using stealth attacks to undermine preservation of prime habitat and stock management. I strongly oppose ^{Call on Congress to protect these critical resources} these back door attempts and call on Congress to work ^{not to return} with me to save this natural treasure. (66 words) ^{from any action that would undermine}

^{support the} This will help ~~implement~~ recent ^{availability to implement the treaty which will help restore} treaty ^{the} with Canada to protect Pacific Coastal Salmon for benefit of environmental concerns and the ^{livelihood} interests of fishermen ~~in the~~ from ~~Alaska~~ Alaska & the Pacific Northwest.

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natural
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While my budget proposes additional funding for salmon restoration, Congress has provided only a fraction of the resources needed to restore salmon habit and implement this important treaty. I call on Congress to provide these critical resources and to refrain from any action that would undermine our ability to implement this treaty, which is vital to restoring these important natural resources.

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