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PRESIDENT WILLIAM J. CLINTON
REMARKS BEFORE THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF BLACK JOURNALISTS
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
JULY 17, 1997

[Acknowledgments: Arthur Fennell (fen- NELL), NABJ president; Joanne Lyons Wooten, NABJ Executive Director; Secretary Herman, Secretary Riley, ~~Prof. John Hope Franklin~~, Judy Winston, Christopher Edley]

Lifetime Achievement Award? Samuel Adams, U. of Kansas - Assoc. Prof. of Journalism; Gary Fields, USA Journalist of Year for coverage of church burnings

During my first campaign for president, the National Association of Black Journalists took the time to hear me out on my vision for America. At your 1992 convention in Detroit, I said I would come back and speak to you if I became President. Well, I'm sorry that this return engagement ended up such a long time coming. But I'm glad to be back. And I am grateful for this opportunity to join all of you tonight.

Many of you chose to become journalists because you believed it was the best way you could use your God-given talents -- your gift with words, your knack for getting answers to tough questions, your instinct with the camera or the microphone -- not just to make living, but to make a difference, and I thank you for that.

As you already know -- maybe some of you were there to report on it -- last month in San Diego, I called upon all Americans to begin addressing what I believe is the greatest challenge facing us in the 21st century. I called upon all Americans to embark on a serious examination of the lingering problems and limitless possibilities of our growing racial and ethnic diversity.

I've come to Chicago today to tell you more about this new initiative and to call upon each of you to recognize the vital role you, as journalists and as African-Americans, can play in leading your newsrooms, your communities and all of America in our dialogue.

Five years ago, I shared with you my ideas on how we could best prepare our country and our people for the 21st century. I spoke of the importance of forging an America where every single person who is willing to work hard and take responsibility would have opportunities to build better lives and better futures for themselves and for their children.

America has made great strides toward reaching this goal. Our economy is the healthiest in a generation and once again the strongest in the world. Our social problems, from crime to poverty, are finally bending to our efforts.

Now, at this time of great prosperity, when there is more cause for hope than fear, when we are not driven to it by some emergency or social cataclysm, I believe we have an unprecedented opportunity to address and perhaps finally resolve the most vexing, perplexing, and often painful issue in the history of America -- the issue of race.

In the coming century, we have an opportunity to become the world's first truly multi-racial democracy. Today the state of Hawaii has no majority racial or ethnic group. Within the next three years, the same will be true of California. Already, five of our largest school districts draw students from over 100 different racial and ethnic groups. And in just fifty years from now, there will be no majority race in America.

As part of our Race Initiative, I am asking every American to become a part of a national dialogue, to share with each other their thoughts on how we can respect -- even celebrate -- our differences while embracing the many things we have in common. I am challenging all Americans to speak frankly about the misunderstandings, disagreements and just plain bigotry that continue to haunt our communities and divide our society by race and ethnicity. Most importantly, I am calling upon all Americans to listen carefully to each other, to find in this frank dialogue a way to make our growing diversity not the great problem but the great promise of the 21st century.

This week in Washington, John Hope Franklin convened the first meeting of the Advisory Board on racial reconciliation. And I am pleased that Judith Winston, general counsel at the Department of Education, has agreed to serve as the board's executive director. The first meeting was full of lively debate and disagreement. Already, we are discovering that even among people who are firmly committed to advancing this dialogue, the process is not going to be easy. But we can't afford to shrink from the task.

Earlier today, at the NAACP Convention in Pittsburgh, I reiterated my long-held belief that the single most important way to build One America for the 21st century is through education. We will never make real our ideal of One America unless we give every American access to the world's best schools, the world's best teachers, and the world's best education.

This means, above all, demanding high standards, high expectations, and high levels of accountability -- from our students, our schools, and our teachers. If we do this, I know that all our children, no matter where they live, can achieve.

I am calling for national standards for the basics -- not federal government standards, but national standards, of what every child must know to do well in the 21st century. I believe we should begin by testing every 4th grader in reading and every 8th grader in math by 1999 to make sure these standards are met. I believe this must be our nation's central educational priority.

We don't do anyone any favors by not holding them to high standards. I know that too many children in our inner cities carry more than their books to school. They carry poverty and the effects of growing up in single parent homes. They carry unmet medical needs. They carry the burden of crime and drugs in their neighborhoods.

When we see people in difficult circumstances, sometimes out of the goodness of our

hearts, we exercise our compassion by expecting less of them -- and we are selling their future right down the drain every time we do it. We must not replace the tyranny of segregation with the tyranny of low expectations.

That is why I announced today a new initiative to help recruit and prepare a diverse group of teachers to help children living in our poorest urban and rural communities meet the highest standards of academic achievement. Our plan will offer scholarship incentives for people who will commit to teach for at least three years in high-poverty communities. We will strengthen our efforts to recruit minorities into teaching. And we will strengthen teacher preparation programs, so that those who go into teaching will be better prepared to teach students served by urban and rural schools.

Your voices and your observations will be very valuable to our continuing dialogue on race. As African-American journalists, you have experienced firsthand the progress and the continuing challenge of race relations in our country. Some of you in this audience are pioneers in your fields, perhaps the first people of color ever to claim a desk, a phone, a typewriter in the newsrooms of our big-city papers and stations. When you were beginning your careers, it was hard enough to find one editor who would consider your work, let alone the hundreds of newspaper and broadcasting executives who this week have descended on the NABJ job fair to recruit the young people here today. They've come here not just because they recognize the value of a diverse and racially representative staff, but also because they know from experience that they'll find some of the best talent in American journalism at this convention.

But we all know that while our newsrooms have come a long way, they still have a long way to go. Just as in other workplaces in America, minority representation on many staffs and mastheads is not what it should be. Wide gaps continue to exist between whites and minorities in the way they perceive their workplaces and in the way they perceive each other.

We must bridge this gap everywhere in America. I encourage you to continue reaching out to your colleagues, to listen to each other, to try to understand where we are all coming from, to lead your organizations in the task of writing, editing or broadcasting fair and thought-provoking stories about the world we live in.

There is so much more we can and must do to build One America in the 21st century. In my heart, I know that we are all up to the challenge.

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