

THE PRESIDENT HAS LEFT
7-4-97

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Matthews
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NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20506

Sylvia
We should read the
letter his report
up to the BO - also he
should be fully advised
to support this - it's going
back as per a prop.
and probably could give
it a lot of help -

BC

THE CHAIRMAN

June 16, 1997

William Clinton
President of the United States
White House
Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. President:

Congratulations on the successful launching of your initiative on racial reconciliation. It is a brave and much needed effort. Your speech in San Diego touched upon the right themes and sounded the right notes. While cheering you on, I would like to give you the benefit of a few of the things that I have learned from the NEH's three-year project, "A National Conversation on American Pluralism and Identity." My lengthy report on that project will emerge from the GPO in July. You have an earlier draft, but I would be glad to send you a copy of the final version now if it might help in the conceptualization of your initiative.

I like very much the use of the term "conversation" to describe what you hope to stimulate among the American people. Conversation implies an exchange that is civil, in which the participants are equals, and in which there is as much listening as talking. I also like your clear realization that this is a multipolar issue. Race is no longer simply a black-white divide. The blurring of racial categories is a friend of reconciliation, of course, but we should also be completely aware that race is a cultural concept and not a genetic one.

From my reading of the polls, and from an intense involvement over the past four years with various organized and unorganized groups of citizens, I know that Americans are worried about the way society seems to be fragmented now along several different fault lines, but they worry particularly about fragmentation growing out of racial, ethnic, linguistic, religious and nationality differences. They may not put this at the top of their list of worries when the pollster calls, but that is because it doesn't seem to be the same sort of immediate issue as jobs, education or crime.

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get to
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In addition, race is an emotional mine field that most people are not willing to tiptoe into, lest they touch some unseen tripwire. Given the opportunity, however, people will talk about "difference" with great relish. If they feel secure enough, they will also reveal their resentments and fears. Americans generally do not have a lot of opportunities to talk to people who are very different from themselves.

I would urge you to continue doing what you did in the San Diego speech: ~~emphasize what we share as Americans.~~ The life-enriching powers of pluralism cannot be appreciated by people who feel that social cohesion is being threatened by "others" or who feel that their "culture" (the atmosphere of values, traditions, and expected behavior that gives shape to their lives) is being replaced by some "foreign" culture. That is why Pat Buchanan struck such a responsive chord in 1996 when he told audiences that he wouldn't let "them" take America away from "us."

I have a three-fold notion of the dynamic American identity, a notion that has evolved over the last four years. The core of the American identity is to be found in our commitment to a democratic political system and to equal individual opportunity. We are fundamentally a political idea. As Gordon Woods argues in his pathbreaking book, The Radicalism of the American Revolution, the commitment to democratic political ideas led to a democratic social order that profoundly altered the society that existed in the eighteenth century American colonies. In any case, when pressed to answer the question, "what do we share as Americans," almost everyone will mention the political system or the Constitution or individual rights or some version of the idea of democracy. I think that is a wonderful thing.

pol
system

Beyond civic nationalism, most Americans think that there actually are some common traits of character that arise from historical experience in America. Not everyone exhibits these, of course, but they are thought to be typically American. Frequently mentioned are such things as self-reliance, optimism, tolerance of differences, self-improvement, pragmatism, the lack of deference, and so on.

values

In addition to the values that flow from the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, and the universalistic values that govern our collective life, there is also a realm of life recognized by ordinary Americans in which it is perfectly ok for particularistic identities to operate, identities that may derive from group membership or some parochial involvement. We all have multiple identities, or multiple layers to our individual identity. Our collective life should be lived in accordance with universal values that apply to everyone equally as individuals without any identity modifiers. In our personal lives, however, there is room

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for identities that we may share with smaller subsets of Americans. Race, gender, ethnicity, religion, and other partial identities belong in this personal realm.

I emerged from the NEH project thinking that the tension between individualism and community in American life is probably the most important "contradiction" in our culture. As Seymour Martin Lipset has recently documented again, we are the most individualistic among the industrialized nations. If we don't learn to think of individualism and community as two parts of a single whole, we are going to continue to have trouble with social cohesion and with figuring out how and when to respond to the needs of community, and especially to the needs of the most vulnerable among us.

I notice that Speaker Gingrich seems to be staking out the territory on the starkly individualistic side of the complex individual/community relationship. In the near term, that is a strong rhetorical position. I would hope that part of the conversation might be to encourage people to think about the ways one can only realize one's full potential as an individual through the group. Indeed, I believe that the individual and his various group identities are mutually dependent.

The idea that our individual identity is learned from our interactions with the various groups and communities to which we belong comes from Hegel and is fundamental to the thinking of John Dewey and numerous other observers of the human scene. It is also a commonplace to say that our own individual fates depend greatly on the fate of our community. The mutuality and simultaneity of the group and the individual is real, but it is a bit harder to explain than the mythic American lonely hero. That will take some creative thought.

Now, a couple of warnings. America is getting more diverse. It is ok to say that. On the other hand, to try to motivate people to move to a more conciliatory racial position by projecting an America in which whites are in the minority risks stimulating a backlash. Many white Americans are feeling threatened anyway. They may well respond with intolerance rather than pragmatism when confronted with the increasing racial complexity of the population. All the ballyhoo about the "new majority" seems to me to invite repressive public policies intended to prevent the new majority from coming about. Indeed, any hint that group rights (American Indians always being an exception) are a good thing threatens everyone in a pluralistic society because it implies limited access to the common life of the nation, be that common life economic or political or cultural.

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Affirmative Action is also a challenge to the universalistic and individualistic principles that are part of the American mindset. That is why quotas and set-asides get so little support among the public. On the other hand, people are aware that the members of some groups suffer from discrimination because of their group membership. This contradiction is the reason that the polls tell us both that Americans don't like Affirmative Action and that they would support government activity to insure equal opportunity.

Affirmative Action either has to be redefined in the public mind so that it means what it was originally intended to mean (aggressive efforts to insure non-discrimination, and perhaps to overcome the lingering effects of past discrimination, as in the very popular Head Start program), or another term must be found to cover the sort of equal opportunity efforts that the public will support and that the society so clearly needs. Opening up education so that it can really serve as the route to equal opportunity must be a central part of the effort of racial reconciliation.

As long and tedious as this letter is, it only ripples the surface of a subject that is oceanic in its importance and contains subtly dangerous currents. I wish you well in the reconciliation effort and think you are courageous to undertake it. As always, I stand ready to help.

Respectfully,



Sheldon Hackney

cc: Ellen Lovell, Office of the First Lady