DESTROYING THE COLOR LINE

JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN AND PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON

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Celeste Bartos Forum

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PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: David Ostwald and his marvelous band will play “Black and Blue.” Remember the one line from “Black and Blue”—“my only sin is in my skin.” David Ostwald.

(song not transcribed)

(applause)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Ladies and gentlemen, I'm Paul Holdengräber, and I'm the Director of Public Programs here at the New York Public Library, otherwise known as Live from the New York Public Library. My goal and mission is to make the lions roar. I think I've achieved it tonight. It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you Catie Marron, the chair of our board. Thank you very much.

(applause)

CATIE MARRON: Good evening everyone, I'm Catie Marron, the chairman of the board of the greatest library in the world, the New York Public Library. **(applause)** Extraordinary people walk through our doors every day, but it's not very often that we have a great historian of America and a great President of our nation having a conversation under our roof. It's a special honor to welcome the forty-second President of the United States, William Jefferson Clinton, and Professor John Hope Franklin to the New York Public Library. Both know the Library well and President Clinton long enjoyed a close friendship with the Library's late president, Tim Healy. The Library has always been a haven for people of passion and great intellect, and it's very exciting for us to have two such distinguished minds with us tonight. To introduce the men behind those minds I would like to welcome David Ferriero, the director and chief executive of our research libraries and who had a major role in organizing this evening's program. Thank you.

(applause)

DAVID FERRIERO: As Catie said, this is the greatest library in the world and I want to add my welcomes. And many of the people who make us great are with us tonight. I want to acknowledge our trustees, Gordon Davis, James Duffy, Elizabeth Rohatyn, Bob Silvers, and Calvin Trillin, who are with us, and members of the City Council, Helen Foster, Eva Moskowitz, and Bill Perkins, thank you all for the support that you give to this library. Two special guests that I want to acknowledge are John Hope Franklin's son, John Whittington Franklin, and his wife Karen Roberts Franklin. Thanks for being with us. **(applause)**

It's a special treat to welcome John Hope Franklin back to the New York Public Library. Twenty-five years ago Vartan Gregorian hosted the launch of Dr. Franklin's biography of George Washington Williams and I've already talked to John Hope about coming back in 2030 for the next celebration. **(laughter)** We're here to celebrate tonight a life—historian, scholar, writer, teacher, public servant, citizen, orchid grower, gourmet cook, fly fisherman, and very, very good friend. And the excuse for that celebration is the publication of *Mirror to America*, the autobiography of John Hope Franklin. A graduate of Fisk University and Harvard, Dr. Franklin has had a distinguished career of teaching and research at Fisk, St. Augustine's, North Carolina College, Howard University, Brooklyn College, the University of Chicago, and holds the title of James B. Duke Professor of History Emeritus at Duke University, where I had the great good fortune to spend eight years as John Hope Franklin's librarian. A prolific author, his *From Slavery to Freedom*, now in its eighth edition, was written to fill a gap in American history, where blacks have been consistently marginalized. Now in its eighth edition, this book has inspired and encouraged many historians to begin to set the record straight.

And who better, then, to lead President Clinton's initiative on race? In a June 1997 address to the graduating class at the University of California, San Diego, where the initiative was announced, President Clinton framed the issue. "I believe the greatest challenge we face is also our greatest opportunity. Of all the questions of discrimination and prejudice that still exist in our society the most perplexing one is the oldest and in some ways today the newest, the problem of race. Can we fulfill the promise of America by embracing all of our citizens of all races? In short, can we become one America in the twenty-first century?" It's my pleasure to present Dr. John Hope Franklin and William Jefferson Clinton, the forty-second President of the United States.

(applause)

PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON: Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen. I want to thank David, Catie, and anyone else who was responsible for giving me the chance to come here and have this conversation with one of the people I most admire in the world, that I enjoy being with, and whose book was a joy for me to read. In 1993 I presented John Hope Franklin with the presidential or the medal, the National Medal of the Humanities and in 1995 with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Then he agreed to be the head of the President's Initiative on Race, where he got a modern indoctrination into politics and how whatever you do is wrong. He was even criticized for discriminating against Native Americans, even though he has the blood of two Native American tribes in his body.

We've had a good time together We've learned a lot, I think, together about politics and life, and I have learned an *immense* amount from his scholarship, going all the way back to books that he

wrote when I was barely born. John Hope Franklin is a very young ninety-year-old man and he has—**(applause)** and he has graced our country with his life, with his scholarship, and with his citizenship, and this book of his, *Mirror to America*, his autobiography, is one that I loved reading and found so much not only to identify with, but to learn from. So I want to get into—we're here to listen to him tonight and talk about his life and his book, and I'm just supposed to ask a few halfway-provocative questions, which I will try to do.

John, in 1992, thirteen years ago, you gave a speech which said that W. E. B. Du Bois said that the problem of the twentieth century was the problem of the color line, and you thought that would be the problem of the twenty-first century. Do you still think so, and, if so, why?

JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN: Mr. President, I'd like to say I'm honored and pleased to be with you this evening and it brings back the most wonderful memories of our association both before and during your presidency. I would be remiss in my judgment if I did not concede that the problem of the twenty-first century *is* the problem of the color line. I regret that it is so, but I am positive that it *is* so. I think it is so because, as Americans, we have never fully confronted the problem of the color line. There have been some starts, some efforts. *You* made a gallant effort, I think, to bring the problem to the attention of the American people, in such a way that they would recognize the existence of it, confront it, with all of the problems that are implied in the very words of "the color line," and would divest themselves to the extent possible of any traditional views or beliefs, that held the country back from confronting the problem.

But, unfortunately, we have *yet* to do what *you* called on us to do, and what others have called on us to do, and that is to look it straight in the face, to recognize it, to acknowledge its existence, to ask ourselves what it is that we can do to eradicate the color line. I don't believe that we have yet made a good-faith effort to do so.

I do believe that our history is so inextricably tied up with the problem of color. We have so long defended every step of the way, from the colonial period down to the present, of the righteousness of the cause which we have advanced, that we cannot separate out from this righteous cause the defects that are part of it, and until we do that, until we can somehow not only *confront* the problem but concede the ways in which the problem has prevented us from acting honestly, steadfastly, and courageously in the face of the problem, that we can do something significant in eradicating it. So it is still with us and I don't believe we yet have done enough to *recognize* its existence and to recognize, therefore, what it takes to eliminate it. That's what I think we have not done and what we *must* do in order to bring it about.

PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON: Well, let me ask you this. I want to ask a couple of follow-up questions, because I deal with this all the time now, basically as I work not only in the United States, but all around the world. What do you think the root in our deepest soul of racial prejudice is? Do you think it is fear of the other? You could argue back from the time of the dawn of the republic through the Civil War and well after that there was some sort of economic motive behind slavery and then Jim Crow. But you can't make that case anymore. What is the root of it? Why does it persist in the face of all evidence that the more we get along across various color lines, the better off we are? How can it persist after 9/11, when we lost three

thousand people from seventy countries here, including over two hundred of them Muslims, when we've got grade schools in New York City with people from eighty different racial and ethnic groups. What is the root of it? Why does it endure?

JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN: I think that the root of it is our unwillingness to concede that we were made in this country as a part of its development, as a part of its growth, as a part of its prosperity, as a part of its richness, we have made no effort to recognize the way in which various constituent elements of our society have contributed to its growth and development. Yes, we have had Katrina, we've had the Civil War, we've had all these other things, but each one of these experiences, even the tragedies, bring out the indescribable developments that have rested on this country's conscience all these years and we have never yet been willing to concede that these problems are part of every American's problems.

PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON: Why? Why have we been unwilling to do that? 'Cause we're afraid of the political ramifications, because we're afraid it would hurt us to look in the mirror and feel that much guilt? Why haven't we done it?

JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN: I don't believe we've actually looked into the mirror. That's why I call this little essay of mine *Mirror to America*. I want them to do precisely that. But let me just see if I can—Let me just suggest some of the few ways in which we have, over the years, not done this. Thomas Jefferson said that we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal and I have problems thinking that he really meant it, for he held people in bondage; not only did he hold people in bondage but he refused to do anything that would mitigate their

bondage, and that would deliver them into freedom. He pleaded with John Coles, his protégé, that he, John Coles, should *not* set his slaves free, and he wrote in his *Notes on Virginia* how deeply flawed African Americans were in their makeup—biological, physiological, intellectual. That's our Thomas Jefferson. If a man of the Enlightenment, one of the great figures of all times, holds these views, and continues to hold them, even when he's sleeping with a black woman, what hope is there for someone less enlightened to take any heroic step?

PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON: You think people in power still believe that? Do you think that people in positions of authority still believe that?

JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN: I think that people in authority, that many people in authority, continue to believe that. How else can we explain the reluctance on the part of people in the twentieth century to make any significant concessions to black people? How do you explain the fact that, here in New York City, even when I was chairman of the History Department at Brooklyn College, that no real estate dealer in Brooklyn would even *show* me a house? And that when he was a little boy, when we moved into that house, he was taunted and hounded by the neighbors, who were sending a message through him that I was not welcome in the neighborhood, although I could teach their children, I could be chairman of the department in which there were fifty-two white people, that I wasn't good enough to live in that community. That wasn't long ago, and I would be naïve to believe that there had been some transformation of the people of that community within the past twenty-five or thirty years, or forty years. No, I continue, I believe that people continue to believe that.

What is it that causes the American banking system to deny to a black person of means—not a poor person, a black person of means—the same opportunity to purchase loans and therefore homes, that other people have the opportunity to, and yet the reports of last month clearly make it well known that that is not happening *now*. That even in the twenty-*first* century, there is a distinction between blacks and whites and if anyone has read Jonathan Kozol's new book, *The Shame of the Nation*, you will know that, even in New York City, the difference in the schools is *vast* and that some schools in *this* city are more similar to third-world schools than they are to schools in certain other portions of *this* city. I don't know what the belief is, Mr. President, but I must reach the conclusion that they continue to believe some of these things that Thomas Jefferson believed.

PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON: Let me push that a little bit. You know, when Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act, he said that he had just killed the Democratic Party in the South, and I was a college student, and I was so proud of him I didn't give a damn if he'd killed it or not. But he basically did, you know, I mean you saw what happened, and a lot of the white people who had discriminatory feelings, they moved away from the Democrats, and we'd kept them over time going back to the Civil War, sometimes through shameful measures, our party had.

I always personally liked President Reagan, but the thing that upset me most about his presidency, more than Iran-Contra, more than anything else is when he declared for reelection in Philadelphia, Mississippi, where those three civil rights workers were murdered, and said that he wanted to be reelected or elected so he could promote states' rights. Now, I'm a white

southerner, I know darn well what was being said, but, then, I thought, well, it's just politics. I hate it. I hate it. **(laughter)** At the core of my being I hate it, but Reagan, you know, he was in Hollywood, he can't be a racist, but I hate this.

But let me tell you something that happened just here lately. When President Bush was elected, the current President Bush, you know I hardly agreed with him on *anything*, but I did like the fact that I thought he was a modern human being. I thought he had not a racist bone in his body, and he made Alberto Gonzales Attorney Genera,l he made Colin Powell Secretary of State, he made Condi Rice the National Security Advisor. Now, I still have the record of having the most minorities in my government, but he did, he kept my Asian American Secretary of Commerce and made him Secretary of Transportation, he was his token Democrat in the Cabinet, but he has now had two black Secretaries of State, but the other night, in the United States Senate, there's been a resolution going around where the Senate condemns and apologizes for the lynchings of African Americans in the South, you know, like a lot of these other things that happened. What should we do about the Japanese internment, and all those things, and, as God is my witness, I thought, well, you know, this is a no-brainer. The leader of the majority in the Senate required that that resolution be voted on at nine o'clock at night, and by voice vote, because some of his caucus was reluctant to be recorded individually, as if they might really make somebody mad back home, and I guess all the white Democrats felt like we'd already made al those people mad because they were happy to vote on it in broad daylight and to have their names recorded.

But it struck me as, how do we explain the fact that here you've got a President who really has—like I said, I disagree with his economic policy, his social policy, environmental policy, a lot of

his foreign policy, **(applause)** but he's made a real effort to be inclusive and to shed the notion that he's racially discriminatory and his party's voting on an anti-lynching thing at nine o'clock at night and a voice vote. Why do these contradictions still exist? Are there still votes in racism in America?

JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN: There are plenty of votes in racism in America, and I'm not as sanguine about the present or the future as you are **(applause)** but I'm not as clear in my appraisal of the *motives*, to say nothing of the actions, but the motives of people in Washington in 2005. I really don't believe that it's necessary—it's not possible for you to declare that because you've got X number of people in the Senate, or in the Cabinet, that that *exonerates* you if your other policies are not commensurate with those. **(applause)** You had four or five people in the Cabinet that were not white, so that's—we've moved beyond that, so we're not going to give people credit after that **(laughter)** because they have a National Security Advisor or they have a Secretary of State who is not white. We've gone beyond that, and it's not possible any longer to get brownie points— **(laughter)**

PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON: So to speak.

(applause)

JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN: —for appointments. You have to go beyond that, you have to do something else. You have to address things like minimum wage, **(applause)** you've got to do something about housing, **(applause)** you've got to do something about the discrimination in

loans that are made, **(applause)** you've got to do something about the difference between people in the workplace, discrimination in the workplace. There are a dozen different ways that you can move on beyond what *you* did to some other things. The recommendation that you left, or the President's Advisory Board on Race when I was the chairman of it, the recommendations that you left with respect to things like housing, agriculture, and loans, and Fannie Mae and places like that, these recommendations were discarded the *moment* you left, you know that, were just wiped out, as indeed all of the recommendations and all of the reports that we made were eliminated on the 20th of January 2001. Nothing else, nothing else, in this whole area. So you get no brownie points for these little things you do, even if it's making someone the Secretary of State, even if it's appointing someone to high office.

As I've said in this book, you've had a few Negroes—I'm going to use that language—you had a few Negroes who were slaveholders, you had a few Negroes in the post–Civil War period who were millionaires, you had a few Negroes who were very high in the military, even when it was segregated. Now, the system accommodates itself to these differences. Indeed, if you didn't have these differences, if you didn't have these little tokens, the whole system might be in danger, you see. The big skyscrapers here in New York have a certain *give*, a certain give, that's to protect them against winds and other forces that might bring them down. They have to *give*, otherwise they'd crumble. The system of slavery had to have a little give in it, otherwise it would collapse. The system in 2005 has to have a few blacks in Wall Street, a few blacks in some other—in the President's cabinet, a few blacks doing this, that, or the other, but that is not going to *change* the system. That's not going to bring it about. You've got to do some fundamental things. You've got to do something about wages, about the minimum wages, you've got to do something about

housing, something really important, you've got to do something in all these other areas, otherwise you're not going to change.

It's—to be sure, I was Chair of the History Department of Brooklyn College. That was the *give* in the system, and when I left Brooklyn College in 1964 to go to the University of Chicago, there was not a great deal of change that I could point to that had occurred at the College in the eight years that I was there. There were no more black chairs of departments. There were not a considerable number of tenured members of the faculty, more than there were when I went there. The system remained essentially the same, essentially the same, and I'm afraid that our system remains essentially the same. This little give is very different from a radical transformation of our society that will bring about the leveling forces that will bring us *all* up to some respectable point that we have not reached *yet*. And I am not going to be assuaged and consoled by the fact that I have all these honors, or that I have all these books, or that I have been able to move into several communities that previously had no blacks. I'm not assuaged by that. I'm not consoled by that. Until I can look back and see a large number of other blacks, moving up, and moving away, without the consternation and resistance of our society, I'm not going to be consoled by the little things that happened to me. I will be overjoyed by the *big* things that happen to all of us, and until we get some kind of leveling process that will bring us all up, I'm not going to be very optimistic.

(applause)

PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON: Every time you say something I think of ten more questions I want to ask you, but let's assume I were a conservative scholar having a debate with you, and I just heard you do this. I would say this—I'll give you a chance to answer this. One of the most moving things to me in your entire autobiography is the constant thread of your relationship with your wife. I almost cried again today when I was reading what you said about sharing your fiftieth wedding anniversary, what you said about sharing the sixtieth anniversary of your graduation from college, and when she became ill, how you went to see her because it was more for your benefit than hers. It was a beautiful story.

I see your son here, and your daughter-in-law, and I hear you speak, so, if I were a conservative, I would say, "But Dr. Franklin, you got all these jobs and all these honors because you richly deserved them. You not only were born with a brilliant mind, but you worked with enormous discipline to develop it, and you applied that developed mind to the materials of history and you produced remarkable book after remarkable book after remarkable book, and you had great values, and you valued your family, and you cherished your wife, and you built a strong, coherent family, and all of these African Americans that are failing in school or populating our jails, they come from broken families, and instead of developing their minds they polluted them with drugs, and they committed violence, and isn't it true that if all—that if the African American—that we've cleared out enough barriers in America that if every African American boy and girl applied themselves in their lives as you had and lived by the values you've lived by, that we wouldn't have half the problems we have." If I were a conservative, that's what I'd say. What would you answer?

JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN: I would tell you were off base, for one thing. **(laughter)** By that I would mean that your comparison of blacks with whites, if that's what you're doing, is unfair and unproductive. I would call your attention to the fact that the young white second-generation resident of the United States has had opportunities that I could not possibly have imagined for myself. Let me give you an example. He came to this country, his father came to this country, let's say around 1900 or 1890, and he did not do much except to get a good job and to be productive. His son could go to a university, let's say in Oklahoma, where my father was born, and his father was born before *him*. My grandfather paid taxes in the State of Oklahoma, in the Territory and then in the State of Oklahoma, and this young immigrant's son, this immigrant's young son, could go to the University of Oklahoma and receive a degree, an undergraduate degree, and then receive a degree in engineering at the lowest expense possible.

His expenses were paid by my father's taxes and my father couldn't even set his *foot* on the Oklahoma University campus. His taxes were going to support this young *white* engineering student, and this father's son, this black father's son, had to go even out of the state to get an education of any respectable kind, and when he got to the graduate-school level, the State of Oklahoma paid him a hundred dollars for his tuition at Harvard, because he was not allowed to go to the University of Oklahoma. And there were others who couldn't go *anywhere*, because they didn't have the means or the resources, the very limited means and resources, that my parents had. More than that, these young blacks did not have the means to secure adequate *elementary* education because of the distinction, the discrimination, between black and white schools.

You could argue that that's over with now. I would argue it's *not* over with now, that there is still—you look in New York City schools, read Jonathan Kozol, it's still a kind of discrimination that you could not imagine, and you know, and I know, that on the Upper East Side of New York there is subsidy of *those* public schools by the parents of the children who go to those schools and that subsidy does not extend, does not extend to Harlem or to these poor areas. **(applause)** They just don't get it, they don't get it. So the discrimination continues, it persists, and I don't believe that as long as you have that kind of distinction, that kind of discrimination, that it can be argued that these poor blacks who are downtrodden and are disadvantaged oughtta get up and brush themselves off and march themselves off to MIT or somewhere and get educated. **(laughter)** That won't work, it's like that cartoon that some of you might remember. Goldwater looked at this little black child. He's there, ragged and hungry, and Goldwater, the senator from Arizona, stands up and says, "Stop being poor!" as though that's going to change the world, and it takes a bit more than that.

PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON: First of all, I agree with that, and you were both, if someone had asked me the same question I asked you, you gave a more eloquent and more modest answer than I would if I'd been you, after the life you've lived. There are some people who are so good that the only **(text out at tape flip)** is to grab them by the feet when they're babies and throw them up against the wal, which has been done, but you don't run a society that way. You run a society, and organize a society, so that way over 90 percent of the people have a chance to succeed. So the example of your life, and your wife's life, and everything you've done, doesn't tell us anything about how we ought to run a society except we ought to give more people the chance to live like you have and to achieve as you have.

Let me ask you a different question now, related to that, because I think this *really* gets to where we're letting people down. There is one high school—and let me stop and say I have the utmost respect for what the New York Commissioner of Education is trying to do here. He worked in my administration, and I think he's really doing some commendable things. There's a high school less than a mile from my office in Harlem, the Frederick Douglass Academy, it's a New York public high school. It's a school of choice, that is you have to ask to be in it, but there's no academic or IQ or income criteria. It's almost a hundred percent minority if not completely, I think it's a hundred percent African American and Latino, it was the last time I was there, anyway. It's an astonishing place. It had a lot of sponsorship from businesses who helped to fund the school uniform policy and provide jobs to kids and other things. They have a hundred percent high school graduation rate. They score above the New York average on the Regents exams, over 90 percent of the young people who graduate go to college, and of those who go to college over 98 percent get four-year degrees on time.

Now, here's my question. Within three or four miles of Frederick Douglass Academy, there's a half dozen high schools or however many there are, none of whom are getting those results. The good news is we *know* that poor African American kids can develop their God-given abilities and do just fine given the requisite efforts, and it makes it all the more maddening that we have refused to do what it takes to replicate excellence. Why have we been unable, in the face of such evidence, to replicate that kind of excellence, the excellence that African American and immigrant Latino kids have produced at Frederick Douglass Academy?

JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN: Because we have been unwilling to do it.

PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON: But how would we do it? If you were in charge, what would you do, and you had total control of the money, what would you do? How would you replicate excellence? That's the number-one thing. I have been fooling with public education for thirty years and it is my number-one frustration. Every problem in America has been solved by somebody, somewhere, and we go right on ignoring it and never replicate it. Why? Why?

JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN: I don't think there's the *zeal* to do it, or the real commitment, or the desire to do it. The Frederick Douglass Academy in Harlem could be replicated by the City of New York, by the City of Washington, by the City of Detroit, or wherever, if they were willing to do it, if they were willing to expend the time, the energy, the resources, the personnel, and so forth. It could be replicated, and I would not, I certainly would not suggest that the kids in—those young people in Harlem have talents or gifts that they don't have in Detroit or they don't have in Los Angeles. I would argue very, very vigorously that if we had the commitment in other places that they have there, and if we had the *expectations*, the expectations, that those committed teachers have at that Academy, that they would come out doing well in these other places if you established it there. I honestly believe that. If *that* can't happen, if that can't be replicated over and over again, then we can throw up our hands and give up.

PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON: Let me ask you a question about the intersection, or the potential intersection, between economics, family structure, and race. There was a study published—I'm embarrassed, and I forgot I was going to do this, so I didn't cut this article out of

the paper, so you'll just have to trust my memory on this. But sometime in the last four or five weeks there was an article I saw in one of the newspapers I read every day stating that one of the urban districts in North Carolina had achieved the largest gains over the last decade in minority test scores. I think it was in Raleigh, but I'm not sure. Is that right?

JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN: Yes, this is in Raleigh.

PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON: And then the people who did the study made an interesting conclusion. It was a countywide district, so they had countywide assignments. And they concluded that in addition to *racially* integrating and not isolating any race in the high schools, in the junior high schools, where they were doing these tests, the other thing that they did that they thought made a big difference is that they *economically* integrated the schools, so that the poorest children were not left to go to school only with other poor children, and the message sent to them was: "You count just as much as everybody else. You're here with the rich kids and the middle-class kids, and by the way we believe you can succeed, you can have a life and we're all doing this together." In other words, that there was a—that whoever did this analysis concluded that the reason, more than whatever the curriculum was, more than whatever the testing pattern was, more than anything else, was that they had achieved racial *and* economic integration in these schools and that accounted for the astonishing improvement in minority test scores as compared with other districts of similar size. I'd like to ask you, do you agree with that and do you have any reflections on it for us?

JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN: I agree with that, with one addition, that if you are teaching these young people, and if they're economically integrated, if they're integrated so far as their abilities are concerned, and so forth, and if their performances are up to expectations, another important factor is, what do the teachers expect of them? And one of the most serious flaws in the so-called desegregation is that the teachers continue to expect *more* of white children than they do of black children. Even in the same classroom, they just sometimes they don't pay any attention and let them go on and do whatever they're doing, because they're not going to be anything, they're not going to do anything, they're not expected to do anything, and they will not do anything, therefore why should I waste my time on them? I will focus on these kids who are going to be promising, and these happen to be white kids, and I'd rather teach them and let the others not be taught. that happens over and over again in our public schools in this country, so expectations are very, very important. These other factors that you mentioned, Mr. President, are very important, but unless you have teachers who expect as much of a brown kid as they do of a white kid, then the expectation's going to collapse, it's going to be a failure.

PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON: Let me ask you this. You were good enough to head this Presidential Initiative on Race, and I thought you produced a remarkable report and I think that things that happened, the process, was remarkable, but, as you know, we were attacked by people who acted like, as you say, some of them thought we ought to let sleeping dogs lie but that's not what they said. Nobody had the guts to stand up and say, "Why is Bill Clinton messing with this?" What they said was, "Oh God, this is just more talk, there's nothing to be said, everybody knows what needs to be done, everybody knows nobody should be racist, and all those people

did was talk." How would you respond to the criticism of the effort that you led, that I supported, *that* criticism, "all they did was talk"?

JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN: First I will say that there were two expectations of those who were observing and were serious. The expectations were too high. I would say secondly that the people who were opposed to the initiative on race that you founded, or began, those people were not going to be satisfied with anything that anybody did. They were not going to be. They had a vested interest in the status quo and they were going to be, they were going to stand up for the status quo regardless. There were those people, too, who felt that your efforts must be brought to naught because *you* would get credit for doing something that no-one else had ever done. And you can't solve the race problem, anyway. It's a waste of time, waste of energy, waste of all the other things. So let it alone, let sleeping dogs lie, yes, they said it. They said it *two* days after you made the appointment, announced it in San Diego, the next day, even before we had *met*, even before we knew each other at all, the next day our failure was announced publicly. We hadn't met, we hadn't done anything. I didn't know the names of these people, except I looked at a little torn piece of paper, and would see . . . But it was pronounced a failure. Now how in the world could you do anything, when on the fourteenth of June 1997, they were having a Requiem Mass for the President's Initiative on Race?

PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON: Are you still glad you did it?

JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN: I wouldn't—that's one of the things that I'm most proud of that I did.

PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON: And what do you think you achieved that was most important for America?

JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN: We achieved a very, very significant increase in the consciousness of people in this country with respect to race. Dialogue on race, our report describes it and enumerates it, we had numbers of dialogues that we began, we had names of organizations that were brought into creation as the result of the effort that we made, and we had a large number of other positive steps that were taken. I know now organizations that are still in existence that came into existence between 1997 and 1998, that came into existence because of the Initiative on Race. And they are proud of what they've done, proud of what they have accomplished, and obviously I'm proud, too. But those who had a vested interest in the *failure* were as proud as I was, because they were pronouncing it a failure even at the word—even on the beginning day, and they continued to say, "It's a failure, it's a failure, it's a failure," and I think they believed it themselves, after a while. But I *know* that it was not a failure. And there are people who said that I never had a conversation with you. That was in one of the biggest papers in the United States, that I had never saw you face to face.

(laughter)

PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON: You rode on the airplane as much as I did, Franklin, of course you did.

JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN: I've got a piece of luggage that I call Air Force One because it was on there so much. But there are people at one of the biggest newspapers in this country who say that you and I never had a conversation.

When the American Society of Newspaper Editors met in Washington while I was chairman of the Advisory Board on Race and I was invited by the chairman of the program committee to speak at a plenary session, at a plenary session, nothing else was going on at that time, the American Society of Newspaper Editors, which had many, many thousands of members choking the corridors of the hotel in Washington. When I went to the plenary session where I was to speak, there weren't as many people as there are in the first three rows here in that vast meeting place. I couldn't believe it. That the Fourth Estate of the United States, in 1998, 1997, would have an opportunity to discuss the problem of race and then have an opportunity, after that, to speak, to write about it all over the country, to disseminate information. I couldn't believe that there were less than a hundred people in that audience. They were choking the corridors all around, I could hardly make my way in to give my speech, and the chairman of the program committee of the American Society of Newspaper Editors wrote me a letter, which I still have, in which he apologized for taking up my time to speak on this subject, one of the most pressing subjects that this country has ever had before it, he apologized for taking up my time, for wasting my time before the members of the Fourth Eestate. They were not interested. They were not interested. They were opposed to any move that was made to improve the conditions, because all of them were gnawing in one way or another at the bone of racism, which was so fundamental in this country in 1997, 1998, as indeed, I'm afraid, Mr. President, it's still fundamental.

And thus, although I am proud of what we did, I am sorry that the people of the United States had no appreciation for the effort that we made. I am asked even *today,* within the past two weeks, people have asked me, "By the way, that President's Advisory Board, did they ever make a report?" Did they ever make a report? On the eighteenth of September 1998, we made a report to *you,* the press was there—by the way, Miss Rosa Parks was there too, that day. And there was so little notice taken of it in the great and powerful press in the United States, that people in 2005 don't know that we made a report, don't know that we made a report. The barrier, the barrier between our committee and the public that kept the information from the public was remarkable, but that's what you have in a country where the communications world is so significant and important that it's the press, radio, and television, that decide what Americans should have or should know, and they don't know *yet* that we made a report on the eighteenth of September 1998. That's seven years ago, but they don't know that we made it and I'm still asked, "Did you make a report? If so, I wonder where I can get it?"

PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON: It's too bad you don't have strong feelings about it. **(laughter)** Let me say for the benefit of all of you it was actually quite an extraordinary report, it chronicled all the meetings we had, all the dialogue we had, the remarkable things that happened with whites and blacks and with new immigrants from other races, with Native Americans, in—all over America. It had, interestingly enough, chronicled the best practices of community reconciliation acts, which I thought was one of the most important things. Anybody that was serious about what was happening down the block and with their neighbors, that was important. And they made several recommendations.

When I was about to leave office, and I want to get to this, I have just a couple more questions here. When I was about to leave office, and I was kind of looking back over eight years and I realized we had the lowest African American unemployment rates and the highest homeownership and business ownership rates ever achieved and the lowest child poverty rates since such statistics have been kept and that at one time the on-time high school graduation rate was 84 percent, as compared to 87 percent for the white population, the closest it had ever been, and the numbers for Latinos were comparable, except for high school graduation rate, where it was still much lower. There were other things still out there, that's one of the things that I was most gripped by. Just like he said about the appointments of Secretaries of State, after I reeled these off, the report basically said to me, "So what? Look here what's still got to be done." The report pointed out the continuing economic disparities, the educational disparities, the health-care disparities, the medical research disparities, and the disparities in the criminal justice system.

I would be remiss if I let this remarkable opportunity go for all these thoughtful people here if I didn't give you a chance to say something about *that*. Assuming you were the Commissioner of Corrections of New York, and you had no—within reason—no budgetary constraints and that you were the policymaker, they would let you make policy, and if you said "I need a 50 percent increase in my budget for X," it would flow. If you were stuck with the consequences of the mistakes of the past that our society has made, running a modern correctional facility with the race and age and gender and education-level makeup you know they all have, what would you do if you had to start *now*, with the mess we've made? What would you do?

JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN: Well, I haven't been invited to run a correctional institution, I've been invited to do a lot of things, but not that, but I'm not sure what I would do, but let me say this. That it's not possible to solve that problem merely at the level of the correctional institution. I might really have to write that one off, that is, I might have to let that be an inspiration to me to do something about a larger problem and a bigger problem, a problem in our society, and that's what I would be inclined to do. But that's not my job, you didn't employ me for that. You employed me to run this correctional institution.

I would seek—first I would want to know exactly why everyone was in there, and what their own background was. I'd want to know whether or not the punishment fit the crime in every instance. I'd want to know what was the crime like, and why was there a commitment, even if the person was actually guilty of the crime, *why* was that person involved in this antisocial criminal act, and I would seek to have a system *within* the correctional institution that would address some of the problems which society had not addressed, but which I would undertake to address in that setting, and I do believe that it would be possible—I have so much faith in the rehabilitation of man, in the reconstruction of man, and all the rest of it. I do believe it would be possible to salvage *some*, maybe not all, but at least *some* of those lives that are in there, and I would undertake to do it with a very extensive, elaborate, maybe expensive, program, of rehabilitation and resuscitation and reconstruction, with a proper amount of optimism and expectation and *belief* in the prospect of improvement. I would go with some effort that would be constructive, even for those young people, or those people in that correctional institution.

PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON: Well, you know when you're in law school, they tell you to never ask a question if you're a lawyer that you don't know the answer to, and I'm glad I did. 'Cause if you look at most correctional budgets, that's one of the things, the reason I asked, that's one of the things the commission decided: it's a racial disparity in the way that the criminal justice system works, the length of sentences, the racial composition of our correctional institutions, and what everybody forgets is that 90 percent of the people that are in the penitentiary in every state in the country are getting out someday. And yet, that would argue for pretty even distribution of the warehousing costs and the punishment costs with the rehabilitation and education and job placement and school placement costs, but if you look at every prison budget, that's not what it is, and if you look at everyplace that's trying to get a prison to come locate in their backyard because it's a poor community, they want the construction jobs for the prison and the prison guard jobs and all this but we don't analyze, we give *no* thought to the most fundamental fact of all—once you punish people and get them out of the way because they've done something terrible, the next most important fact is that 90 percent of them are getting out. That's the next most important fact, and we don't think about it and that's what I think makes the racial disparities all the more poignant, because it means that if you screw up running the thing, you're going to have a double problem, not a single one, manifest in every life that walks out the door, where you fail. So that's why I asked you that question.

I've got to ask this question. As America grows more diverse, racially and religiously, you know I spent a lot of time, and ultimately failed, after seven years of progress, to make peace in the Middle East. My greatest regret, or total omission, is that I was so preoccupied with trying to go in to stop the genocide of the Bosnian Muslims and the Croatian Catholics in the Balkans that I

literally didn't do anything to stop the Rwandan genocide of the Hutus against the Tutsis and their Hutu sympathizers. I have seen ethnic genocide in Africa. And I stopped some others there, tribal violence. I worked with some success on the religious differences in Northern Ireland, and with some success, but ultimately not success, in the Middle East, and lots of other place. The difference in Indonesia and East Timor between the Catholic East Timorese and the Indonesian Muslims—I could give you lots of examples.

Here's the question I want to ask. What do you see in common, and what is fundamentally different, in the race problems within America, and perhaps in other societies, with the religious conflicts and the ethnic tensions we see in the Balkans? Actually, that's a misnomer. There's no real biological difference, genetically, in Bosnia, between the Muslims and the Croatian Catholics and the Bosnia Muslims and the Serbian Orthodox Christians, that's just where all those empires ended one time a long time ago, but they wound up being in different camps. What do the religious conflicts around the world, the tribal conflicts in Africa, have in common with racial discrimination in terms of their psychological roots, or other roots, and what is fundamentally different about it? And can we learn anything at all in dealing with our racial diversity from the way people are managing religious and ethnic and tribal conflicts in other parts of the world?

JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN: I remember the first time I went to Israel and to Jordan and that area. My impression I had, after I had talked with a number of people, was that there is no solution to this problem. They were so out of reason, they were so beyond reach when it came to a reasonable conversation, just an ordinary conversation, and they were so intent on telling me

how bad the other people were, that I said, “I don’t know that this can ever be solved. I’m not sure it can ever be solved.” I didn’t continue to hold that view, although, I must say, that it’s a pretty difficult problem. The religion and the ethnic conflicts, religious and ethnic conflicts, that I see in various parts of the world are not to be belittled. They are fundamental, historically, they are fundamental, although we, sitting back here, whatever we are doing, whatever our vantage point is, we can say that those people are *mad* to be that hostile to each other, we can say that, without understanding, appreciating, the historic differences that go back for centuries.

The lesson we *can* learn from that is that there were mistakes made all the way back to the beginning of time, it would seem, and that we ought not to make the same mistakes, that we ought to be able to solve some of our problems on the basis of reason even if we see that these problems are intractable for those areas of the world where they exist. But I would say that we ought to use those examples as instances or examples where—that we must veer away from, that we must solve in a way that would not *identify* us with the emotional tremors and emotional rancor that we see in so many parts of the world.

What we need to do, it seems to me, is to get our house in order *here* and use *that* as an example of what ought to be done, what can be done, what *may* be done, in some other parts of the world. That it’s not enough for us to go over and solve the problems of Bosnia or Serbia or Iraq or Syria when we might do better by doing the best we can with what *we* have and using *that* as an example to the rest of the world. **(applause)**

Nothing troubled me more—I've been all over the world—nothing troubled me more than to see Americans in other parts of the world trying to tell those people in other parts of the world how to live. **(applause)** We can look in the mirror and see that maybe we have a few things that we could do to shore up ourselves and our conduct, and maybe by those examples, the rest of the world would get some notion of how they ought to treat each other, but as long as we don't treat each other with the respect that human beings owe to each other, I don't think that we have a right to go around the world telling people how to act. I don't think so.

We're going to spread democracy throughout the world, and we don't even elect the President of the United States in a democratic way. As long as we've got an eighteenth-century high-toned Electoral College that says to the general public in this country that you're too dumb to elect the President of the United states, we'll elect him for you in the Electoral College, and we'll pass on to you the results when we get them. Until we do that, I'm not sure we're in a position to tell anyone how to act.

Until we get a military force, if we must have one, until we get a military force that is democratic, that selects its members on *some* basis that resembles a democratic basis, I don't think we can tell the people in the rest of the world how to act militarily. If we run around our junior high schools and lure junior high school people into the Army with chewing gum and candy and whatever else we can lure them with, and other people all ready to give him twenty thousand dollar bonus for enlisting, we're at the same time, we don't provide jobs and economic opportunities to these young people, and they have no alternative except to go into the military,

and until we do something about that we have no business telling people in other parts of the world how to act. **(applause)**

And finally, Mr. President, on that score, let me just say that I think that a volunteer army in a democracy is somewhat inconsistent, for we are not in a position, we're too unequal in the status we have, economic and otherwise, we are too unequal to be on a basis of being able to *volunteer*. Some can, some cannot, and until we can, until we are leveled out and made equal in some way, then the temptations are so great in one place that it would be, it's unfair to the rest of our population. That's a long roundabout way, but that's what I think about that.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Mr. President, I'm told that you are fairly busy. We were hoping that you might play the saxophone for us tonight, and we brought an extra one.

(applause)

PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON: No, but before we close, I just want to say, you can all understand now why knowing this man has been such a gift and blessing in my life, and why I consider him to be a national treasure. Before I turn it over to you, I want to give you the last world. Actually, I wrote a book, you know, it's a terrifying thing, I did *one* and John's done dozens, and I had a college roommate who wrote a bunch of books, and my mama thought he was more successful than I was until I got elected President. **(laughter)** I mean, being governor was nothing compared to writing a book and now that I've done it I've see why she felt that way. This is hard work, so I want you to go buy his book, so I'll be a little shameless here. You said

what the book was about when you talked about *Mirror to America*. What's the most important thing—having lived the long, rich life you have—what's the most important thing you'd like your fellow Americans to think about you and your life after reading this book?

JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN: The most important thing that I would like for them to think about me is that my life has been one of hard work, of discipline, of self-reliance, and of indulgence of my fellow man, that over the years, ninety-plus years, over these years, I have seen it all, I've seen so much, I've seen all kinds, but I have been fortunate to have had the opportunity to have friends like *you*, and like so many others in the audience, that have cheered me on the way, and that whatever I have done has been the result of the support and generosity and indulgence of people in my family, and my friends. And that's what I want them to remember, that I'm thankful to be a part of this great—

(applause)

DAVID FERRIERO: Thank you very much, President Clinton and John Hope Franklin.

(applause)