

directly affected by this incredible explosion of diversity while we become more integrated into a world of global diversity than the rest of us.

So let's begin. Our first student here is McHughson Chambers. And he has an interesting ethnic background himself. I'd like to ask him basically to begin by trying to level with us about what impact, if any, race has on his life and whether he believes it affects any of his relationships with other people and his future prospects in life.

McHughson.

NOTE: The President spoke at noon in the E.J. Thomas Performing Arts Hall at the University of Akron. In his remarks, he referred to Dr. Marion Ruebel, president, University of Akron; Summit County Executive Tim Davis; and former Governor of Mississippi William F. Winter, member, President's Advisory Board on Race. The discussion was part of "One America: The President's Initiative on Race."

Remarks in a Townhall Meeting on Race in Akron

December 3, 1997

[University of Akron student McHughson Chambers stated that he was biracial and described his encounters with discrimination.]

The President. Our second student, Jonathan Morgan. Jonathan, what do you think about what he said? Do you think there is still discrimination here at this school or in this community or in the country? And do you think that most people want to live in an integrated society?

[Mr. Morgan responded that there were still a lot of prejudiced people, particularly in the older generations.]

The President. Maybe we need a panel on ageism instead of racism. [Laughter]

Mr. Morgan. I apologize. [Laughter]

The President. That makes it worse. Don't do that. [Laughter]

[Mr. Morgan said he believed that his own generation had worked out their prejudices.]

The President. Do you think it's because of personal experiences, do you think it's because you've had more direct personal experience with people from different age groups? Or do you think it's because you grew up in a different time where the climate, the legal and the political and the social climate, was different?

Mr. Morgan. I think it was because I grew up in a different time. We grew up watching television. "The Cosby Show" was my favorite show. [Laughter]

The President. So, therefore, if you worked at a bank and a black person came in with

a check you wouldn't necessarily think it ought to be held because you saw Bill Cosby, and he was a good role model? [Laughter] No, this is important. No, no, this is important.

Mr. Morgan. Yes, I don't think I would give him a hard time. But at the same time, I have my own prejudices, whereas if I'm walking downtown on a street and I see a black man walking towards me that's not dressed as well, I might be a little bit scared. So, I mean, at the same time I have those prejudices.

The President. Do you think that's because of television crime shows, or because of your personal experience?

Mr. Morgan. It would have nothing to do with my personal experience. Just from the media, television shows, and things that I have heard.

The President. Christina Ibarra, what do you think about that? Do you believe that attitudes are better among young people? Do you think that there is still discrimination today? Is it worse for African-Americans than it is for other minority groups; is it different? What do you think?

[Student Christina Ibarra agreed that older people were more prejudiced but said that young people raised in prejudiced environments changed after they interacted with a more diverse group of people at the university.]

The President. So do you believe—let me ask you this—do you believe that having an integrated educational environment is the primary reason that young people have better attitudes, more open attitudes than older people—because

they have been able to go to school with people of different races?

[Ms. Ibarra responded that the educational environment was beneficial, but that an open attitude was a matter of personal choice.]

The President. Let me ask you just one other question. Then I want to go on to—back to our moderator who's here to talk about the next group of folks. There's a big difference, even in college campuses, between the racial composition of the student body and the daily lives of the students, at least in a lot of places. That is, there are a lot of places where the student body is integrated but social life is largely segregated.

Is that always a bad thing? What about that, what about that here, and what do you think about that? Our institutions of worship are largely segregated on Sunday. Is that a bad thing, or not? Is it a good thing? What should be our—in other words, one of the things that I want to try to get America to think about is, how do we define success here? I don't personally think it's a bad thing that there is—that people in many ways like to be with other people of their own racial and ethnic group any more than their own religious group. But on the other hand, it could become a very bad thing if it goes too far, as we've seen in other countries. So how do you know whether the environment is working for you and for other people? How much integration is enough? How much—what kind of segregation is acceptable if it's voluntary? How do you deal with all that? Have you ever thought about it in that way?

Go ahead.

[At this point, the discussion continued, and moderator Dave Liebarth then introduced three authors who were the next participants in the discussion.]

The President. I'd like to just start very briefly by giving the authors a chance to comment on how what they've heard from these students today meshes with what they heard when they were preparing their recent books.

And David, maybe we ought to start with you.

[David K. Shipler, former *New York Times* reporter and author of "A Country of Strangers: Black and White in America," stated that discrimination had become more subtle and gave several examples.]

The President. Let me just briefly—first of all, thank you very much. The reason that I wanted to do this, and a lot of these things, is that I believe there are in any given community literally millions of instances like this where we're not ever fully aware of the motivations behind what we do or where other people will perceive there may be a racial motivation where there isn't one, which is also just as bad because you have the same net bottom-line result, which is the drifting apart of people. And I don't think there is any legal policy answer to this. I think that this is something we've really got to work our way through.

Jonathan, I was really proud of you for saying that if you were walking and spotted Bill Cosby—and all of your classmates—you were walking down the street alone at night and you saw a black man coming at you and you were better dressed than he was, you might be scared, because that's a pretty gutsy thing for you to admit, but that's the kind of stuff we've got to get out on the table. We need to get this out.

But just parenthetically, David, I had a group of African-American journalists in to see me a couple of months ago. Every journalist, all of them with college degrees, all of them quite successful—every single man in the crowd had been stopped by a police officer for no apparent reason, every one of them, 100 percent of them—I asked them. So these are things we have to get out there and discuss.

Abigail. She has a rosier view, and I hope she's got the guts to say it out here now. [Laughter] Come on.

[Abigail Thernstrom, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute who coauthored "America in Black and White: One Nation Indivisible" with her husband, Steven, the Winthrop professor of history at Harvard, stated that she disliked racial preferences or racial classifications. Saying that African-American progress was here to stay, she gave examples and concluded by quoting Coretta Scott King that Martin Luther King's dream of equality had become deeply embedded in the fabric of America.]

The President. Thank you. Let me just say, I believe that it's a lot better. I grew up in the segregated South, so I have personal experience of how it's changed, since I'm one of those older people Jonathan talked about. [Laughter] I've actually gotten kind of used to it now.

But to me, that makes this effort all the more important because what I want the American people to do is to have confidence. We know now we can make our economy work. We know now we can have the crime rate go down. We know now we can actually reduce the number of people on welfare and have more people at work. We know things that we didn't know just a few years ago, and we do know we can make progress on this whole complex of issues.

But I think it's also important to point out that there is a lot of residue there, like what McHughson told, the little bank story, and that progress should give us energy for the work ahead, not put us into denial about it. That's the only thing that I want to make sure we don't do.

Go ahead. What would you like to say about this?

[Beverly Daniel Tatum, psychologist and professor at Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA, and author of "Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria, and Other Conversations About Race," described her course on the psychology of racism and other efforts to establish an honest discussion on race, and the role of fear in hampering that dialog.]

The President. Abigail.

[Ms. Thernstrom stated that people opposed to racial preferences were often accused of being too optimistic and believing that racism had disappeared. She indicated that while America still had a long way to go, it should proceed on the basis of optimism rather than pessimism.]

The President. I agree with that. If I could just make one other point. Then I'll call on David.

One reason I think all this talking business is more important than ever before is that if you posit the fact—if you look at the growth in educational attainment, the growth of the middle class among African-Americans or—you can say, well, things have gotten a lot better. And then if you identify what the continuing problems are, like what McHughson said about—and the examples David cited, you can say, these things require changes in human perception, human heart, you've got to have more talking.

I think the thing that's more profound is, when you look at these communities that have—there are several counties in America with peo-

ple from more than 100 different racial and ethnic groups now, and they're all different in many ways. They have different perceptions and different cultural patterns.

I know, after the Los Angeles riots, I went out and walked the streets, and I was so stunned by the gulf between Korean grocers and their African-American customers. And I've been in other cities where there were Arab-American merchants and their Hispanic customers or African-American customers—all these things are proliferating. That's the kind of thing that you see eating other countries alive from the inside out.

And that's why we have to begin to deal with this, because a lot of you have got to bring the insights you have from your own not only personal but historic experiences to bear on a whole different America. It's a new thing out there where there's somebody from everyplace out there with a family and a community and a culture and a set of perceptions that they will bring to bear on all their interactions.

Go ahead, David.

[Mr. Shipler said that optimism was too close to complacency and pessimism was too close to resignation. Mr. Liebarth then introduced the next participants. Rev. Knute Larson, white pastor of the Chapel in Akron, described growing up in a racist environment and then introduced his friend Rev. Ronald Fowler, black pastor of the Arlington Church of God. Reverend Fowler stated that whites had always had preferential treatment and therefore the Nation should intentionally provide incentives and opportunities for minorities, as it did for World War II veterans. He concluded that he and Reverend Larson had worked together to create an atmosphere for free discussion of racial issues.]

The President. Let me ask you something. What impact has your relationship had on the people in your churches? I mean, it's all very well—preachers are supposed to do the right thing. *[Laughter]* I mean, come on. What impact has it had on people in your churches?

[Reverend Larson stated that the impact had been good but that the effort had to be intentional, and he urged the President to continue to model that kind of behavior. He concluded that humor helps, joking that his church was

teaching Reverend Fowler's how to sing. Reverend Fowler responded that his church had never done country music well.]

The President. You'll probably get a wire from Charley Pride this afternoon. [*Laughter*]

[Reverend Fowler continued that the pastors' joint efforts had created a climate of acceptance and an inclusive spirit and that other organizations in Akron were following their example.]

The President. Let me ask you just one other question and we'll go to the next group. I'll be the cynic now, just for purposes of argument. I'll say, okay this is really nice. You've got two churches, and you pray on Sunday and everybody is nice to each other and you make fun about each other's music. And I know which is the real beneficiary here—that's okay. [*Laughter*] We do all that kind of stuff. How is it changing these people's lives? How is it changing the life in Akron? How does it result in less discrimination in the workplace or in the school or people helping each other to succeed in school or at work? Can you give us any examples about what it's done other than make people feel good for an hour on Sunday or some other church event?

[Reverend Fowler stated that members of the congregations, though initially doubtful, now were able to discuss issues more openly and disagree without attributing each other's views to racism.]

The President. That's the big issue, by the way—having people feel free to disagree with people of different races without having somebody draw a racial inference, that's a huge thing. That's one of the benchmarks when you know you're getting where you need to be.

[Reverend Larson stressed the importance of listening and intentional social interaction. Mr. Liebarth then introduced the topic of interracial relationships, and high school student Erica Sanders expressed her desire to be seen as an individual, rather than as a member of the black community at home and church or as a spokesperson for black America at her white school. Student Erica Wright stressed the importance of her parents' guidance in shaping her choices in life. Mr. Liebarth then introduced D.J. Beatty, a black University of Akron student, who described growing up in a multiracial household and stated that though he shared certain cultural

styles with his white social circle, his political views were much more those of the black liberal.]

The President. Why do you think white people are more conservative than black people?

[Mr. Beatty stated that economic differences, such as most whites dealing with banks and many blacks dealing with public assistance, resulted in different viewpoints. He stated that without an activist Government and the social movement, blacks would be far behind.]

The President. I agree with that, but let me say—let me make the more sophisticated argument against affirmative action. Let's deal with that a minute. Hardly anybody thinks that we shouldn't have laws against discrimination on the books, and some people think they should be on the books but not enforced, so I've had a hard time getting Congress to give me the money to clean out the backlog of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. But nonetheless, everybody just about—there is almost—literally over 80 percent of the people in America, if you took a poll, would say, we should enforce the existing civil rights laws against discrimination.

Now, then the question is, what affirmative steps are necessary to really give everybody an equal chance and hopefully to reduce ultimately the racial disparities in income and educational level and all these other things?

The argument against affirmative action is partly that it doesn't even work, that basically the main beneficiaries of it have been middle class minorities who were well educated and could tap into it, and that what we really need to do is to go back to Lyndon Johnson's other emphasis and have an economics-based social program that offers better educational opportunity to everybody, offers more job opportunities to everybody, and tries to get rid of the dramatically increasing economic disparity of the last 20 years.

This is a very important point. The difference for all you younger people—my generation, after World War II until the mid-seventies, all America grew together, and in fact the poorest Americans actually had their income increase by a slightly higher percentage than the wealthiest Americans. Then for about 20 years, because of the globalization of the economy, the loss of manufacturing jobs, the rise of service jobs,

the rise in importance of education, what happened was the people in the upper 20 percent, their incomes rose like crazy for 20 years; the people in the bottom 40 percent were stagnant to dropping—more education-related than anything else, but it had something to do with where people lived and what their connections and ties were.

So there is a lot of argument that, basically, that affirmative action has gotten in trouble for two reasons. One is it's not really answering the real problem, which is the economic problem. The other is that people believe that if someone gets something based on their race, then someone is losing something, someone is not—it's a zero-sum game. Someone is losing out who otherwise would have gotten an opportunity to which they're entitled.

Now, I don't subscribe to this. I believe that you can have properly tailored affirmative action programs which can command broad majority support. We'll get back to that if you want. But I just think that—there is no question, however, that the biggest problems that minorities have in this country today are problems that are shared with disadvantaged white people too—access to education, access to jobs—and that we've got to find a way somehow to talk to each other and to work on this so that we're coming together.

And I think that's what you were trying to say. But I'd like to hear you talk a little bit about that and the affirmative action thing. And then maybe you want to open it up to some other people.

[*Mr. Beatty stated that there was a rising tide of classism in America which was linked to the race issue and that there should be policies to address the class issue as well.*]

The President. Let me just—no, no, I agree with what you said, but let me—[*laughter*—] I don't mean that. I agree with what you said. We have actually seen some evidence in the last 2 years that inequality may be declining again for the first time in 20 years, that incomes are rising—after-tax incomes are rising for the bottom 40 percent and maybe in a way that will not only cause incomes to rise for the first time in 20 years for that group of people, relative to inflation, but to diminish inequality a little.

And we've had a strategy of changing the tax system, changing the investment incentives,

increasing educational opportunity, giving more—spending a lot more money to help re-train people who lose their jobs, that I think are contributing to that.

So I think the real issue is—although we haven't done nearly as much as I would like to, and we're going to work on that some more—the real issue is, if you had, to use the modern jargon, a class-based affirmative opportunity agenda, not race-based but class-based, which might disproportionately benefit minorities if they were disproportionately poor, for example, or disproportionately isolated or disproportionately in bad schools—if you had that, would there still be an argument for any kind of affirmative action admissions policies to various colleges and universities or any kind of affirmative action problems when it comes to Government contracting because there are so few African-Americans in certain kinds of businesses? I think that's the question.

I want to let you go on and call on some more people, but I think that's really the nub of the affirmative action debate. If you get rid of the—politically and substantively you'll help more people and build more unity by having an economic basis for social policy now.

[*Mr. Liebarth introduced University of Akron pre-med student Anna Arroyo, who said that as a light-skinned Puerto Rican, she was often perceived as white, but then treated differently after disclosing her race. She concluded that people should realize the range of diversity among Hispanic-Americans, discard preconceived notions about racial characteristics, and accept others for who they are.*]

The President. Let me ask you a question. Do you believe that most non-Hispanics understand the real difference between Puerto Ricans and Mexican-Americans, for example?

[*Ms. Arroyo responded that people generally did not understand that each Hispanic country had its own unique culture. Mr. Liebarth then introduced University of Akron student Jason Kessler, who complained about some religions teaching that poor is bad, thus placing a stigma on poor people.*]

The President. Let me push this a little more. They don't really do that—and what they really act like is that if you're poor it's your own fault, right?

Mr. Kessler. In a way. And it's like a sign that God is putting something bad on you. At least—maybe this is just an isolated incident, but I have come in contact with this—that this is a sign from God that because you're poor, you are going to hell.

[Mr. Liebarth introduced family violence program coordinator Vanesa Cordero, who noted that America was no longer just black and white but a cultural mix including Hispanic-Americans. She stated that blacks and Hispanics were treated differently in court than whites, and having an advocate made a difference, particularly for non-English speakers.]

The President. Wait, wait, wait. You mean, if they have an advocate, they do better?

Ms. Cordero. Yes, they do.

The President. But are they treated differently in what the judges do to them by race, or are they just treated differently in terms of how they're treated in the court setting?

[Ms. Cordero said that in her experience, the system was often harder on Hispanic juveniles than on whites.]

The President. But you do think that Hispanic kids have a harder time in the court system.

[Ms. Cordero responded that her son was discriminated against because he was Hispanic and said that she also felt discrimination before she worked her way up from welfare to being a professional with a college degree.]

The President. Let me just say very briefly, one of the things that I like about the Chicago school experience—you heard me mention the Chicago school experiment—is they used to be known for one thing only: They had a teachers' strike every year whether they needed one or not. At the beginning of every school year, there was always a teachers' strike, and there was a picture of the Governor's school-age child crawling around on the floor, playing games in the Governor's office while the teachers' strike went on.

Now, what they're trying to do is to change—I think maybe the most important thing they're trying to do is to change the expectations, school by school, so that they have the same high expectations of all children without regard to their racial or ethnic group. If they get that done, I predict they'll change the performance results

as well. But that's—anyway, I just wanted to support you for what you did.

[Noting that the last part of the discussion was to focus on looking forward, Mr. Liebarth introduced Samir Gibara, chairman and chief executive officer, Goodyear Tire and Rubber Co. Mr. Gibara indicated that a diverse workplace population pursuing common business goals and objectives and sharing success or failure would create bonds that went beyond racial tensions; stated that diversity provided a competitive advantage for expansion to other countries; and listed his company's values: integrity and honesty, a diverse work force, and training and education.]

The President. Let me just follow up. I believe myself that what you just said is not only true but is the answer to a lot of the next steps. That is, just as you heard all these young people say they thought that there was less discrimination among young people, partly because they all go to school together, the more people we have working together, succeeding together, doing something constructive together, helping their own families together, the less problems we're going to have. I don't think there is any question about that.

Let me ask you, before we run out of time—and I'll call on you next because you've been having your hand up—but I want you to think about this, and I want you to be blunt and brief—blunt and brief. What do you think is the most important thing we should be doing about this issue today? Whether you think I should do it, or you should do it, or somebody else should do it—I'll try to call on as many people as I can, as quickly as I can. Raise your hand, the most important thing. You go first.

[At this point, participants offered suggestions, including confronting family members who make racist comments and addressing the Hispanic high school dropout rate.]

The President. We're going to run out of time. We don't have time to talk about this, but I want all of you to think about it, especially the Hispanics here. For the last 30 years, Hispanics had higher work force participation rates than African-Americans, and often left school to go to work to support the family. It was a real cultural thing. Now African-American high school graduation rates are almost equal to whites; they're almost statistically indistinguishable. But the high school dropout rate among

Hispanics is still very high. Apparently, for good cultural reasons, they think they've got to get out and help the family and all, but it's a disaster in the modern economy. We need to figure out what to do about it.

But what's the most important thing to do? Go ahead. Let's go back to the main question. Go ahead.

[Other participants suggested establishing education opportunity zones, taking the risk of an honest dialog, avoiding racial jokes and slurs, and including the underclass in the racial dialog.]

The President. So what's the most important thing we can do for the underclass?

Participant. Well, that's what I was hoping to get from you. That was my question I was going to ask. [Laughter]

The President. I'll tell you what I think. What we're trying to do is to reestablish vibrant living communities where really poor people live. We're trying to mix housing now between middle class and poor people in the neighborhoods. We're trying to give special tax incentives for people who invest to put jobs back there. We're trying to make bank loans more available, and we're trying to overhaul the schools.

I think you've got to put life back together. This is an economic problem, and it does not exclusively affect minorities, so it is not a race-based problem although minorities are disproportionately affected by the large underclass in America. It's very hard to keep a country together if 20 percent of the people, no matter how hard they work, are still going to fall further and further behind.

Go ahead.

[A participant suggested culturally specific programs to overcome the perceptions of white superiority and black inferiority.]

The President. Before we run out of time, is there any Asian-American who wants to be heard? Go ahead.

[Participant David Flores stressed the importance of education, moral values, and the family.]

The President. Very briefly—since I have been President, my Education Secretary, Secretary Riley, who is here with us today, has done a lot of work to try to support schools that introduce character education programs into the cur-

riculum. Do you think that's a good thing? I gather what you say is you not only think it's a good thing, but you think that the absence of prejudice is one of the virtues we ought to be trying to promote on a uniform basis throughout the country, and it ought to be part of the school curriculum.

Mr. Flores. Yes, exactly.

The President. You agree with that.

[Mr. Flores agreed but pointed out that money was limited and school buildings were old.]

The President. Briefly—I tried to pass a school construction initiative, and we'll come back to that in some forum. But the other thing I wanted to say is there was money appropriated by the Congress in two different bills this year to give the school districts for after-school programs, partly because the vast majority of juvenile crime is committed between 3 o'clock in the afternoon and 7 o'clock at night. And young people need something positive to do, and this could be a part of what could be done.

So all of you who are here from school districts, look at what the Congress did. I just signed two bills with two different pots of money to help the schools stay open after hours so you could do positive things and get young people involved in constructive activities.

[An Asian-American student stated that schools should promote cultural diversity, because often families could not, and advocated more round-table discussions. Mr. Liebarth then asked the President to summarize the discussion.]

The President. My summary is going to be, I'll hear from two more people. Go ahead. [Laughter] And the lady with the gloves, I like your gloves. Go ahead.

[Other participants suggested fostering leadership among multiracial youth and including multicultural education as part of the history curriculum. Mayor Donald Plusquellic of Akron then thanked the President for his example in holding the meeting.]

The President. I believe that education is a big part of this. And I believe that the economics is a big part of this. And I've spent most of my public life—more than 20 years—working on those two things. But let me also tell you, there are a lot of highly intelligent people with a lot of money who still have bigoted hearts or who at least are insensitive to it. This is

more than education and economics. That's why we're here. That's why I asked the two ministers to talk more than once—because I believe that—I agree with you.

You know, it's easy—people get preoccupied with their own problems. But when this is over, you guys got to keep doing this. And the people at these other 100 sites have got to keep doing this. This is not a day's battle. We have to change the way we live in America and the way we relate to each other because of the global economy, because of the workplace, and because of the people that are in our own neighborhoods. We can't possibly answer all this.

This sort of thing needs to become a normal part of daily life in every community in America that crosses political and racial and ethnic and religious and every other lines. The society is too complex, too diverse, and it's changing too fast for anybody to be able to sit off in a corner and give everybody else a bunch of rules about how we're going to do things. This is what we have to do in America. We have to change the way we govern ourselves, literally, at the grassroots level, to do this.

I'm convinced if you have more of this—I'm convinced if we had 4 hours, I could sit here and listen to you all, and I'd never get tired of it, and we would go on and on, and then you'd want to do more. And that ought to tell you something. Everybody has still got their hand up. That ought to tell you something. We should be doing this in America on a systematic, disciplined basis, community by community. That's the way we ought to run our lives.

So, one more. Go ahead. Quick. Everybody's got to be quick. Go ahead.

[Participants suggested following the Golden Rule and educating someone else about one's own culture and heritage.]

The President. Our moderator will either have a heart attack or cut me off in a minute here. [Laughter] Be quick, everybody.

[Participants advocated teaching love, respect, and manners in the home, and basic workplace attitudes of reliability, teamwork, communication, and willingness to continue learning.]

The President. I guess what I would—I'd like to go back to what he said, though. I think you've got to help us do that. There is a huge labor shortage today of people in the technical skills. We could do a lot—if you think there's

an economic basis to racial differences in America today, there ought to be a national effort to train people who are poor and who are isolated to take these jobs. This is maddening to me. Even though the unemployment rate is 4.7 percent, there are hundreds of thousands of jobs going begging in America today that would immediately make people middle class people.

Go ahead.

[Fannie Brown, director, Coming Together Project, said the answer was in the pain of talking about differences and giving each side the opportunity to present their viewpoint. Other participants then explained how their home environment prepared them to be tolerant and understanding adults.]

The President. Let me say, I'm very sympathetic with what all of you have said about your home environment. It had a big impact on me. So—I mean, I had a grandfather with a sixth-grade education who was a poor white Southerner who believed in integration. I don't know why. But he did, and he had a big impact on me. So I agree with that.

But I want to say again, when you look to the future, you must—and we do all that—you must find a way to organize—that's why I like this Coming Together Project—you must find a way to organize a continuing mechanism where people of good will can come together and deal with this.

Let me just give you an example. We talked about old people, young people—Denver is plagued—you've probably seen—with these horrible recent killings by skinheads of people because of their race. Now, Denver is a city that's only 12 percent black, that's got a black mayor. It is not a racist city. It's a remarkable thing. But even there they have this problem. Now, they've got to figure out how they're going to deal with this—and not just go prosecute the people that committed the crime but what's going on in the community, how are they going to deal with it, and how are they going to come together.

I'm exhilarated by what I see from all of you today, but you have to make a commitment in some form or fashion to continue this in a disciplined way, because something will come up, things will continue to come up, and this is an ongoing effort. It's not just a one-shot deal. Yes.

[A participant raised the issue of social segregation, saying that people should not be comfortable about only associating with members of their own race. Another participant said he hoped for progress to the point that his grandchildren would not relate to the term "hate crime."]

The President. And what's the most important thing we can do about it?

Participant. I think that we have to make it possible for all individuals, whatever race, to be part of our neighborhoods and know them as human beings.

[*Marion Ruebel, president, University of Akron, emphasized that universities have an obligation to open minds and teach students teamwork, respect, civility, justice, and tolerance, in addition to high-tech skills.*]

Mr. Liebarth. Mr. President, we're being asked for your closing remarks on this program now. [Laughter]

The President. I don't have any—my closing remarks are, this is the beginning, not the end. My closing remarks are that—there ought to be a strategy to deal with the economic underclass; there ought to be a middle class strategy, too, that embraces people across different races. We have left open the question of affirmative action.

Just curiously, how many of you believe we should continue some sort of affirmative action policy with regard to admissions to colleges and universities? [Applause] Okay, how many of you don't believe we should? What about out here? [Applause]

Ms. Thernstrom. Change it to preferences. Racial preferences is different than affirmative action.

The President. That's right—racial preferences are. It's a loaded word.

Ms. Thernstrom. Americans believe in affirmative action. They don't believe in preferences.

The President. Abigail, do you favor the United States Army abolishing the affirmative action program that produced Colin Powell—yes or no? Yes or no? I get asked all these hard questions all the time. I want to do it.

Ms. Thernstrom. I do not think that it is racial preferences that made Colin Powell—

The President. He thinks he was helped by it.

Ms. Thernstrom. —the overwhelming majority of Americans want American citizens to be treated as individuals. And we've heard the voice here of—

The President. Should we abolish the Army's affirmative action program, yes or no?

Ms. Thernstrom. We should—the Army does one thing very, very right; it prepares kids—it takes kids before the Army, and it prepares them to compete equally. That's what you're talking about when you're talking about American education.

Let us have real equality of education. These preferences disguise the problem. The real problem is the racial skills gap, and we ignore it when we—

The President. Well, then the real problem may be the criteria for why we admit people to college, too—how we do it.

One more here and then Congressman Sawyer.

[A participant stated that there was an opportunity gap, not a racial skills gap, and encouraged people to be aware of racism in their communities and to help those hurt by it.]

The President. I agree with that, but let me—to be fair to Abigail—now, let me explain. Now, wait a minute. I think it's important—I'm going to call on Congressman Sawyer, but I think you all need to understand about this, because this affirmative action debate, you know, that's all the press wants to write about anyway. They'll probably ignore the fact that we did the rest of this here, which was—and the rest of this is the important part that we did here.

But let me explain what the difference is. The military affirmative action program does try to get results by race. But it simultaneously prepares people. So that if—what they try to do is they have these education and training programs, and then they hope when you go from lieutenant to captain that there will be a group of the captain pool, of potential captains, that reflect the racial composition of the lower rank as well. But they do prepare people.

The problem is that you have different schools. When you go from high school to college, the college doesn't have control over the seniors in high school to do that. If they did that, you could have exactly the same program and we wouldn't have this anxiety. Instead we have a system where we assume that the only reliable predictor of success in college is how

you did on the SAT or how you did on the grades. So the trick is, since I think our schools would be much poorer if there were no racial diversity—look around here at the schools here—the trick is to find a way of doing this that people believe is merit-based and that—so they don't think someone is getting something they're not entitled to and, not only that, knocking somebody out of a spot to which they are entitled.

But I think it's very important. A lot of people haven't analyzed this—no one criticizes—very few people criticize the Army program. It's given us the highest quality Army in the world. The only real differences between the Army program and college admissions is that you're in continuously in the Army program, whereas you go from a high school that may or may not be adequate into college with the affirmative action program. We need to really think this through as a country. And that's why I dropped the bomb at the end, because we can't possibly resolve it today anyway.

Congressman, do you want to go? And then we'll quit.

[Representative Thomas Sawyer thanked the President for participating in the discussion and stated that the initiative was an important start to the process of improving race relations in the country.]

The President. Thank you.

I would like to—I'd like to thank our scholars, David and Abigail and Beverly. I would like to thank the students who spoke in the beginning and all the people on the panel.

To me this is a simple issue that has all kinds of complex manifestations. But the simple issue

is, we live in a country that is the longest lasting democracy in human history, founded on the elementary proposition that we are created equal by God. That's what the Constitution says. And we have never lived that way perfectly, but the whole history of America is in large measure the story of our attempt to give a more perfect meaning to the thing we started with, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

And now we have been given this enormous new world to live in with these enormous opportunities, in which, as you heard our business executive say, we do not have a person to waste. We're given a world that is much more interesting and exciting if we know and relate to people of different racial and other backgrounds. And it's up to us to decide what to do with it.

Our country has never really dealt with the race issue before except in an atmosphere of crisis and conflict and riots in the cities. So a lot of people, I will say again, think I am nuts to be doing this. You know, what's the end, what's the point? The point is, making a more perfect Union. The point is, proving we can have one America. The point is, it will be a lot more interesting, a lot more fun, and far more noble if we do it right.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at approximately 12:10 p.m. in the E.J. Thomas Performing Arts Hall at the University of Akron. In his remarks, he referred to Mayor Wellington E. Webb of Denver, CO; and Gen. Colin L. Powell, USA (Ret.), former Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Remarks to the Community in Akron December 3, 1997

Thank you very much, Dee Hammonds, for that introduction and for the welcome to the University of Akron. I have enjoyed being here very much, and I'm very grateful to President Ruebel and to all the officials and the students who did such a good job today. Mr. Mayor, County Executive Davis, Senator Glenn, Congressman Sawyer, Congressman Stokes, members of the city council, the State legislators

and other officials, I hope you were proud of your fellow Ohioans today. I thought they were great on the town meeting.

I want to say a special word of appreciation to all the people in Akron who have been a part of the Coming Together Project because it's one of the reasons we came here. We wanted to come to a place in the heartland of America which could embody the best of America's