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It is a special privilege for me to join you here in Richmond this morning. I am obviously impressed that so many of you would show up at this early hour—especially after being forewarned as to who your speaker would be. I greatly appreciate and am honored by your invitation.

I take note of the fact that I come from a city that has a great deal in common with your own. Our old history and our recent history are amazingly parallel. Both of our cities were burned during the Civil War, and for a hundred years after Appomattox we became the political centers for the preservation of racial segregation. We made common cause in the development of the strategy of massive resistance that overwhelmed every other interest and caused us to spend so much of our energy in the pursuit of another lost cause.

Since the 1960's, though, with the ending of Jim Crow and largely as a result of that, we have seen the remarkable progress in the development of our two cities. We can take a great deal of pride and satisfaction in how far we have come. And as far as this city is concerned we can attribute much of this progress to so many of you in this room this morning.

The parallels between our cities are striking. They are both state capitals. You have the oldest governor's mansion in the country. We have the second oldest. Both cities are the seat of major colleges and universities, major medical facilities, and historical and cultural centers. And while Richmond is older, both take pride in their history.

Both have about the same population, but your metropolitan area is larger.

Our economies rely on similar bases. We have similar demographics, reflecting unfortunately now too much white flight to the suburbs and too much white withdrawal from the public schools. But encouragingly what I believe we also have in common is a commitment to use our strengths to build a sense of community where all of our people can enjoy a quality of life that will bring the satisfaction and fulfillment that they seek.

So today without any pretense at having very many answers, I can tell you that at least I think I understand the questions, and I look forward to sharing experiences and exchanging ideas with you. So many of you know a lot more about these matters than I do.

Let me begin by telling you of a still indelible impression that came to me out of this city almost forty years ago. It was in January, 1970 as I recall. It was

a photograph on the front page of our local Jackson newspaper. It was a picture of the newly inaugurated Governor of Virginia, Linwood Holton, holding his two young daughters by the hand as he led them into a recently integrated public school here in Richmond.

I did not know Governor Holton then, but I drew immense inspiration from what I beheld to be the kind of leading by example that we needed so badly then and that we still need. I was impressed that the State of Virginia would elect such a man.

I had run for Governor of Mississippi the year before. The old racial fires were still burning, and I went down in crushing defeat in a bitter, racist campaign. I envied you people in Virginia for the apparent progress that you were making. After all, our two states had been vying for several years as to which one could put up the most massive resistance against integration. With Prince Edward County as an example you may even have been a little ahead of us in that regard.

But that was a long time ago. The world has turned over many times since then, and now we can look back on those old dark days and be glad that they are behind us — but not so far behind us that we can't be reminded that we still have a lot of work to do to insure that we don't drop back into a mindset of indifference and neglect.

That is what I really want to talk about today. Because I believe that I can identify with you regarding the many challenges that our two communities face, I shall be so presumptuous as to suggest some things that maybe we can do together — not to cry on each other's shoulder but to gain assurance from the victories that we have won and the strengths that we can bring to the task. Of all of the challenges that face us, I am convinced that the preservation of a high quality public-school system is the highest priority for the advancement of our cities. Public Education must be at the center of any effort to sustain a community and provide the basis for its future growth. I had high hopes for the public schools in Jackson when in the 1970's they became fully integrated. Our three young daughters found themselves right in the middle of that massive transition. They came through it with excellent academic results but just as importantly with an enhanced understanding of their place in the diverse real world of which they are now a well adjusted and successful part. Unfortunately, too many of their white counterparts did not choose to make that journey with them.

In the intervening years since then we have seen a huge migration out of the public schools in our city. The result has been the growing resegregation of those schools and others across the South and a widening gulf between those young people who no longer go to school with one another. This is most

unfortunate in terms of achieving the kind of unified society that is so essential to our well-being as a nation.

The 2004 State of the South Report prepared by a remarkable team of thinkers at MDC in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, poses the challenge this way:

Two interrelated questions confront our region's leaders:  
Can the South muster the will to develop public schools aligned with the demands of a fast-changing economy? Can the region develop schools that meet the needs of a multi-ethnic, democratic society?

How we answer those two daunting questions will determine how bright the future of the South and our respective cities will be. Will it be marked by sunshine or shadow?

It is not an overstatement to say that the task which confronts us now is a more complex and difficult one than we have ever known. Here is why it is so hard. In the first place our region still has the country's highest poverty rate. Approximately one out of five children in the South lives below the poverty level, including 2 million black children, 1.1 million Latino children and 1.5 million white children. In the last twenty years the percentage of low income students in the public schools across the South has grown from 37 percent to 54 percent. It is 41 percent in the rest of the country. These are children who are automatically at risk. They tend to drop out of school, become involved in the juvenile justice system, and become teen-age parents. These factors doom most of them to permanent economic dependency. We are confronted with all of these problems in our two cities.

These discouraging realities face us at the same time that the racial demographics of the South are drastically changing and as the public schools are becoming re-segregated. The number of children in the South grew in the decade of the nineties by 3.3 million. One-half of that increase was among Latino children. This huge demographic shift means that it is more important than ever that we make the schools and work venues the places where people of different races can come together and learn to understand and respect their different backgrounds.

This cannot be done, however, if we insist on going backwards in terms of creating truly integrated schools. By the end of the 1980's Southern schools were the most integrated in the country. In 1988 more than four out of ten black students attended majority white schools. Now it is less than three out of ten, and continuing to decrease. If that trend continues, we shall miss a critical

opportunity to establish the basis for a better and more united society. The State of the South Report points out where we are:

Today, Southerners must recognize the consequences of economic isolation and a divided society as a threat to their self-interest. Despite the regional progress over the last quarter of a century, its communities will suffer anew if they allow children to grow up and go to school isolated by race and income.

This brings me to what I believe still remains the greatest challenge that we face. I must tell you that the problem of race, despite all the progress that we have made, remains the thorniest, trickiest and most difficult barrier that we confront in achieving a truly united country.

One of the reasons that it is so hard is that most white folks and most black folks do not share the same perspective. Most white folks think that we have come a lot further in race relations than most black people do. There is still too much misunderstanding between the races, too much white flight, too little trust, too many subtle nuances that signal the continuing gap. Closing that gap remains our most important unfinished business, and it is, of course, not just a Southern problem.

The challenge now is for people of both races to work to come together with the same commitment and intensity that a generation ago so many white Southerners sought to maintain segregation and so many black Southerners sought to end it. The new realities require us to understand our mutual interdependence. Member of both races must reach out to each other in ways which transcend race.

All of this is a matter of trying to be honest with ourselves and each other. It is a matter of developing a sense of trust based on everyone – black and white – trying to start from the same place. That is admittedly harder for blacks to do than for whites. For black people have more to forgive even if they cannot and probably should not forget. But there must come a time when we have to recognize that we are all in this together – when we must move past the old divisions of race and understand our common interests and our common humanity.

I had the privilege several years ago to serve on a National Advisory Board on Race appointed by the President. That was an incredible experience, and it afforded me a chance to see how many of us are still victims of

stereotypes and how much ignorance about each other still exists between the races. All of us have to deal with this.

When the White House called me about serving on the Advisory Board, they told me who my colleagues would be – the chairman was Dr. John Hope Franklin, the distinguished African American historian, now retired from Duke University, and then there were the former Republican Governor of New Jersey, a Korean American woman, a Hispanic leader, the then CEO of the Nissan Corporation, and a black woman preacher from Harlem. It was an impressive group, but I had some reservations about a black woman preacher from New York City. All of my old Southern white male biases started to surface. I thought to myself without ever having met her, "That woman is going to cause trouble." And then I met her. She was absolutely delightful. We bonded immediately. Later after we had gotten to know each other well, I told her of my initial reservations.

"Listen," she said. "Let me tell you something. When they told me there was going to be an old ex-Governor of Mississippi on the commission, I knew I wouldn't be able to get along with him."

We wound up being very close friends, and I even got her to come to Mississippi where she had never been. Before she agreed to make the trip, though, she wanted me to assure her that she would be safe there. And when she did come, she, of course, found the warmest kind of welcome. She came back just a few weeks ago.

The experiences on that Advisory Board pointed up for me how wide the gap still is between the races despite all the progress that we have made. And the gap exists not just between people in Mississippi and New York. It exists in my hometown of Jackson and here in Virginia and in communities all over America. Eliminating that gap is arguably the biggest challenge facing us in this country today, but it must be done.

There are those cynics and skeptics who say this can't be accomplished. The late Senator Sam Erwin North Carolina tells the story of two old mountaineers sitting on a bench in front of a country store.

"Ed", one says to the other. "Do you believe in infant baptism."

Ed says, "Believe in it. Hell, I've seen it done." Well, let me tell you I've also seen the task of bringing folks together across the racial divide successfully done. It will not happen, though, unless we put our best effort into it.

I mentioned earlier my experience as a member of the Presidential Advisory Board on Race. I learned a great deal in that undertaking. Here is what I found that was of particular significance. In my service as a member of that Board, I attended many meetings and met with people one on one all over the country. I went to communities in 26 states over a period of more than a year. I met with people of every conceivable racial and ethnic and economic background — in places widely divergent — in South Los Angeles and South Chicago and Miami — in the Fairfax County, Virginia — in the Hispanic communities of the Southwest — in the little cotton towns of the Mississippi Delta.

Let me tell you this. Wherever I went there were certain things that everybody agreed on. Regardless of race or economic condition or social station everybody agreed that they wanted their children to get the best education that they could. Everybody wanted a fair chance at a job that would sustain them and their families. Everybody wanted to live in a decent house on a safe street, and above all else everybody wanted to be treated with fairness and dignity and respect.

I ask you today why can't we come together in a unified effort to attain those very reasonable objectives. If we can do that, then the superficial differences based on what we look like will begin to seem less important. This is where we must concentrate our effort.

Let me mention two specific initiatives that I have personally been involved in in Mississippi. While they admittedly are not cure-alls, I believe that they are worthy of mention.

One of these efforts is called Parents for Public Schools, which originated in Jackson and now has 35 chapters in 15 states. It started in the living room of my friend, Dick Molpus, who was then serving as Mississippi Secretary of State and who had two small children in the public schools. He and his wife, Sally, invited other similarly situated parents to join them in a local effort to keep as many children as possible in the public schools, which were facing a lot of white flight.

The movement attracted support from the business community in Jackson and soon spread to other cities in the state and ultimately around the country. Now the organization is partnering with the Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership in Kentucky to train parents in their role in support of their children and their schools. In addition Mississippi has launched a "Schoolhouse to the Statehouse" campaign to shape policies and programs from local schools to the

state level to improve education throughout the state. This is a model that can be replicated anywhere. All of this is beginning to make a real difference in the quality of education in those communities where it is being tried.

I believe that you will find programs like this of value here in Richmond.

In addition the Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation at the University of Mississippi is working, as the name suggests, at helping community leaders break down some of the remaining racial barriers. It has done some remarkable work in going to communities where there has been little real communication between the races — places like Neshoba County, Mississippi, where three civil rights workers were murdered in 1964 and where little healing had taken place over almost forty years.

Now the Philadelphia Coalition consisting of people of both races has become a highly successful force for reconciliation in that community. Three years ago on the fortieth anniversary of the murders some 1500 people from the community came together on a Sunday afternoon to proclaim their unity. The local white officials and business leaders issued a moving heartfelt statement of contrition and apology to the African American community, and they all stood together to proclaim their unity and their commitment to each other. That meeting led the following year to the apprehension and conviction of one of the ring leaders of the murderers who had escaped apprehension at the time. Similar work is going on in a number of communities in Mississippi around the region. We have been meeting with some of your neighbors in Price Edward County.

It is one thing to make grandiose albeit sincere pronouncements, on this subject, but where the rubber hits the road is in the actual work that goes into building and maintaining a livable society and a unified community. That is where it really gets hard. There are no silver bullets. First of all it is going to require each one of us, black and white, to make a personal commitment to do what we can to eliminate racial prejudice and misunderstanding and mistrust. We must work at it together across racial lines to sustain our public schools and to build communities that recognize our common humanity and our common destiny. That is no small order, but the records will be so great.

The liberation from our old biases and prejudices will enable us to ensure that our children and grandchildren will inherit a better country than has existed before. That is what responsible citizenship is all about — in doing the things that may not immediately and directly benefit us but will create for those who come after us the opportunity for a more fulfilling and productive life. That is a legacy that all of us should be proud to leave.