

## Paper Abstract

---

*But 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 the newest, the problem of race...That is why I have come here today, to ask the American people to join me in a great national effort to perfect the promise of America for this new time as we seek to build our more perfect union. Now, when there is more cause for hope than fear, when we are not driven to it by emergency or social cataclysm, now is the time we should learn together, talk together, and act together to build one America.*

— President William Jefferson

Clinton<sup>1</sup>

**Race** remains the nation's thorniest social issue, the most exceptionally divisive force in American politics. And, yet prior to his inauguration as the country's 42<sup>nd</sup> president, Bill Clinton understood the importance — necessity even — of confronting "the rift" between blacks and whites. Conventional wisdom suggests that Clinton's desire to initiate a yearlong nationwide discussion of race in the Spring of 1997 naturally evolved out of the fact that he came of age in a segregated Arkansas; and he, himself, fervently believed that racial prejudice and discrimination were simply incompatible with what the Swedish-born sociologist Gunnar Myrdal termed "the American Creed."

**However**, an alternative explanation is that the president's "call to action" on race grew out of his continued reformulation of the liberal Democratic party agenda. That is, with a powerful mix of considerable rhetorical and policy skills, personal and philosophical style, Clinton continued to challenge Democratic-liberal doctrine on matters of race, rights, values, and reciprocal obligation. Arguably, the president's national conversation on race was a "New Democratic" attempt to seriously grapple with race-driven conflicts that continue to plague our politics and society.

**Drawing** primarily upon an extensive literature review, personal interviews, and an array of public opinion data, my purpose in this paper is to critically assess the President Clinton's National Initiative on Race: What was the state of race relations when President Clinton launched his National Conversation on Race in June 1997? How many Americans actually followed the president's Race Initiative? And, what did they think of the project at the time of the president's June 14th remarks? The Clinton White House clearly viewed the project as an opportunity to further advance the "New Democrat" philosophy, but a year after the president launched the initiative, how did the public view the project? Did Americans believe Clinton's initiative would eventually help

---

<sup>1</sup> President Clinton's June 14, 1997 speech to graduates at the University of California-San Diego, where he formally laid out the overall context for his call for a national conversation on race.

to improve race relations? And were the aims and objectives of the Race Initiative accomplished?

**Finally**, the significance of the president's Initiative on Race must be gauged by the impact it had both on changing the perceptions of swing white voters and on the policies adopted and advanced by the Democratic party. And so, I conclude the paper by reflecting on how race continues to structure much of the Democratic party's politics.