

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

March 20, 1997

MEMORANDUM FOR ERSKINE BOWLES
SYLVIA MATHEWS

FROM: BRUCE REED *BR/ek*
ELENA KAGAN *EK*

SUBJECT: RACE COMMISSION/COUNCIL

We are concerned that the two pending proposals for a race commission or council have serious flaws. This memo presents a third alternative.

The proposal to establish a full-fledged Presidential commission on race has four weaknesses.

- First, it could cede control over large aspects of the President's domestic agenda -- involving, for example, welfare, education, and criminal justice -- to an outside body that may or may not agree with the President's priorities or accept the constraints of the President's budget. Of course, the President could reject all or part of the commission's eventual recommendations, but we should think twice before putting ourselves in the position of having to do so.
- Second, it will involve the President in a morass of difficult appointments questions. Does Jesse Jackson have a place on the Commission? Colin Powell? How wide or narrow should be the spectrum of ideological views represented on the Commission?
- Third, it subjects the President to criticism that he is not doing anything. Many people think we have studied questions involving race long enough and that it is past time to put that study to practical use.
- Fourth, and perhaps most important, it fails to take advantage of the President's unique talents on this issue. Any President could appoint a commission and respond to its proposals. This President has the unprecedented ability to talk about race in a way that the American people respond to and to construct his own agenda for racial reconciliation.

The proposal to establish an action-oriented Council, along the lines of the Council on Physical Fitness, also raises significant concerns, at least as described so far.

- First, it is subject to characterization as a "do-good," "touchy-feely," essentially unrigorous and unserious response to the most intractable of America's social problems.

- Second and relatedly, it would not in fact deal with the broadscale policy issues of welfare, criminal justice, education, and so forth that are central to achieving progress in this area.
- Third, it too would be removed from the President (though potentially somewhat less so than the commission) and so would fail to take advantage of his ability to spur reconciliation and progress.

A third alternative makes the President central to a second-term effort on racial issues, at the same time as it combines intellectual rigor with an action orientation. It would include the following components:

- A major multi-day conference on racial issues to take place at the White House, perhaps in early summer. Participants in this conference would include all the people who would be candidates for the commission: political figures (e.g., Jesse Jackson, Pat Moynihan); business, civil rights, and religious leaders; scholars and public intellectuals (e.g., William Julius Wilson, Skip Gates, Randy Kennedy). It also could include events or discussions involving the participation of "non-elites," in order to widen the range of views considered and command the attention of the broadest possible audience.
- A series of "town halls" led by the President on race-related issues. These events would occur in different areas of the country among different kinds of communities. They would focus on particular subjects, such as race and criminal justice. They would involve both "ordinary Americans" and experts in the field, who would contribute empirical evidence and rigorous analysis.
- Policy announcements to precede, accompany, and follow the conference and town halls. We would put into place a broad policy development process, led by the White House, involving all the agencies, and reaching out to public policy experts outside the government. This process (with the events described above serving as action-forcing mechanisms) would produce a wide range of actions and proposals -- both large and small, executive and legislative.

It should be noted that this proposal easily can accommodate some attention to issues of intolerance generally, involving not only racial minorities, but also women, religious minorities, and gays and lesbians. Although we would not like to see the conference, town halls, and policy process focus exclusively (or even mainly) on this area, nothing would be easier than to have, for example, one panel of the conference or a single town hall address these issues.

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AGENDA

We will discuss the pros and cons for each of the following proposals, including the appropriate balance between study and action, and the focus and scope of our proposal:

- A Commission
- A Commission on Race and Council on Unity
- A Conference / Summit with town meetings