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**Race-Race Initiative: Press**

Race initiative - press

# Talk amongst yourselves

## Will Clinton's new racial 'dialogue' really change anyone's mind?

BY JULIAN E. BARNES

**A**KRON, OHIO—This week, President Clinton will hold a town hall meeting here to jump-start what he hopes will be a "national dialogue" on race. Clinton chose Akron because for the past four years many residents have attended formal workshops and dialogues to ease racial tension and misunderstanding.

But in Akron's poorest and most heavily African-American neighborhoods, such as Summit Lake, few seem to have even heard of the city's racial dialogues. That includes the proprietor of a combination convenience and liquor store, where racial tension writhes across the counter. "I feel prejudice from black people," says the store owner, an Arab immigrant. "They call me a camel jockey or a sand nigger. They hate anyone who is not a black."

The bigotry goes both ways. Noting that his black clientele criticizes him for not hiring local blacks, the proprietor complains that he once hired a young black man who then stole cigarettes from the store. "You can't trust them," he says, oblivious to his own prejudice. "We have cigarettes stolen all the time. If they worked here it would be worse."

**An emphasis on discussion.** When Clinton announced last June that he would launch a major initiative on race, he pointedly avoided mentioning specific legislative proposals. Instead, he proposed the amorphous and seemingly unobjectionable idea of starting a national dialogue. To help lead his initiative, Clinton appointed a seven-member board to study America's race problem, develop public-policy recommendations, and encourage structured focus groups and informal talks between blacks and whites.

But while it's hard to argue with the proposition that talking about racial problems is better than not talking about them, the president's race initiative does beg a nettlesome question: What precisely is all this discussion supposed to accomplish?

It's not as though Americans don't talk about racial issues. Millions were obsessed by the O. J. Simpson trial, with its knotty questions about race and the criminal justice system. Yet neither the exhaustive discussions across the country nor the trial itself seemed to



Marvin Lewis gets his hair cut by Marcus Reid in

reconcile views on Simpson's guilt or innocence. In July 1994, shortly after Simpson's arrest, 68 percent of whites thought the charges were true, as opposed to 24 percent of blacks. After Simpson's acquittal, the gap remained, with 73 percent of whites but only 27 percent of blacks believing him to be guilty.

Clinton is hoping that his national dialogue will be more successful at bringing people together across racial lines. "Those were debates that generated more heat than light," says Judith Winston, executive director of the president's initiative. Rather, Winston says Clinton wants his initiative to spark countless small group discussions in which real people of different races honestly share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

So far, however, the White House has



Lawyers Gilbert and Hendler began meeting four years ago.



id in the Summit Lake area of Akron, Ohio. Few in this neighborhood have heard about the city's racial dialogues.

had trouble nurturing open and honest debate on race even within its own hand-picked board. After a November 19 meeting in College Park, Md., Chairman John Hope Franklin announced that the board was not going to hear from affirmative action opponents. Critics immediately charged that the dialogue had become a monologue. After the criticism, the White House invited conservative scholar Abigail Thernstrom to participate in the Akron town hall discussion. The invitation miffed the board's consultant, Prof. Christopher Edley Jr., who says Thernstrom is an irresponsible voice who reaches for sound bites, not thoughtful examinations. But board member Angela Oh says Thernstrom, an affirmative action opponent, has done meaningful research on race and is a good addition to the board.

Indeed, these days the board is mostly dialoguing on the nature of its dialogue. Several board members say that requiring that the meetings be held in public has made it harder to have an honest discussion. And some board members feel the White House is scared of conflict. "The White House doesn't want us to air our disagreements," says board member Thomas Kean, former Republican governor of New Jersey, "but we've got to, or else we won't progress." Edley agrees, arguing that "political hacks" on the White House staff are scared that the board will generate controversy or make an impolitic move. "It's just generally a chill over anything they perceive as risky," Edley says. Officials at the White House deny that they are trying to avoid controversy.

Oh has a different complaint. A few

weeks ago Clinton advisers Bruce Reed and Gene Sperling outlined specific race-oriented proposals for the president—such as helping minorities obtain banking services and targeting literacy programs to minorities. Last week, a White House official said those proposals are being guided by the advisory board's work. But according to Oh, the board has hardly been involved in policy discussions at all. "The public-policy people operate in their own world," she says. "I don't know who they are or what they are doing. I've never met them."

Officials will try to put the controversies surrounding the board and its dialogue behind them this week as the initiative moves into a new phase. Clinton hopes his Donahue-like appearance at a racial discussion group in Akron this week will inspire millions of ordinary Americans into discussions of their own across racial lines.

But does face-to-face discussion between the races lead to any kind of positive outcome? The tentative answer seems to be yes, a bit. Structured dialogues are often successful at getting participants talking—at least for the length of the session. A small study of Cleveland-area race dialogues after a series of five sessions showed participants' attitudes had shifted: They believed that communication could improve race relations, affirmative action was needed, and that the

media portrayed minorities in a negative light. Even critics like Frederick Lynch, author of *The Diversity Machine*, argue that ideologically neutral workshops can be helpful in teaching people about cultural differences. Lynch maintains, however, that workshops that promote contentious political goals, such as racial preferences, often provoke backlashes from participants.

The members of Clinton's advisory board say they hope the upcoming national and local dialogues will promote not just better racial understanding but fresh ideas to solve real-world racial dilemmas. Yet few dialogue groups have succeeded in doing so. In Riverside, Calif., city leaders shot down dialogue groups' suggestions to form a police review board and a race relations curricu-

U.S. NEWS

lum The group was frustrated and participation in the program dropped dramatically. In Minneapolis, a nonprofit group organized a series of racial dialogues with the express intent of devising new ways to integrate schools without busing. Unfortunately, the citizen board found itself unable to reach consensus on a course of action. Its members "would not move from raw opinion to a collective judgment," says Dick Little, the director of the project.

**A growing process.** Still, calls to dialogue have led to some long-term successes. In Akron, Edward Gilbert, a black lawyer, and Michael Hendler, a white Jewish attorney, began meeting at one another's houses with other professional couples. "From my perspective it's been a growing process. I've learned a lot," says Gilbert. "We started connecting and talking even between the sessions." Says Hendler: "I consider us good friends."

On one level, the situation with Gilbert and Hendler illustrates a typical short-



Crabbs (right) says daily contacts matter more than focus groups.

coming of efforts at racial dialogue: Rather than drawing from a broad cross section of the community, formalized racial conversations tend to attract participants from similar backgrounds, almost all of whom are already committed to improving race relations. It's little surprise that two upper-middle-class lawyers like Gilbert and Hendler can find common ground and be friends.

But Clinton's effort will be vastly more worthwhile if it can also inspire more people like Duane Crabbs, a white Akron firefighter, who has participated in some of Akron's racial focus groups. Crabbs lives in an integrated and high-crime neighborhood. Several weeks ago, a white neighbor warned him not to let local black children play in his yard. The neighbor—who did not let African-American children into his house—said the black kids don't behave.

Crabbs sat at his picnic table and just kept talking to his neighbor, pointing out, among other things, that one of the prime troublemakers in the neighborhood was white. As the two men talked the neighbor seemed to change his position from "black kids don't behave" to "some parents don't control their kids." A couple of weeks later, Crabbs noticed that his neighbor allowed one of the black kids into the house to play. Score a small victory for racial dialogue. ■

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