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Speech by Bill Bradley at the National Action Network Harlem, N.Y. August 23, 1999

Senator Bill Bradley

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CIVIL RIGHTS IN THE NEXT MILLENNIUM

**SPEECH BY BILL BRADLEY*
AT THE
NATIONAL ACTION NETWORK
HARLEM, N.Y.
AUGUST 23, 1999**

I was walking up here and someone stopped me and they said, “I used to watch you play basketball when I was a little boy.” He was about 50 years old.

I want to talk about a serious subject, but I first want to tell you one story from those years just so we have a frame of reference. I was in about my third year with the New York Knicks, and we played the Boston Celtics back-to-back Saturday night and Sunday afternoon. We lost both games. And the following week I got a letter from a fan. And the letter said, “Bradley, if you lose one more game to the Boston Celtics, I’m going to come to your house and kill your dog.” And he signed his name – Joe Pell. I don’t know, maybe because he signed his name, I wrote back to him and I said, “Dear Joe Pell, Look, we don’t like to lose any more than you do, we do the best we can, and by the way, I don’t own a dog.”

* Bill Bradley was born in 1943 in Crystal City, Missouri, a small multiracial, multiethnic town on the banks of the Mississippi River. Although race relations were peaceful in the small town, the realities of racial prejudice in the 1940’s and 1950’s presented obstacles for Bradley as he traveled throughout the state with his racially mixed sporting teams. Bradley attended Princeton University before moving on to obtain his master’s degree in politics, philosophy, and economics as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford. After spending ten years playing professional basketball with the New York Knicks, Bradley won the New Jersey Senate seat in 1978, becoming the youngest member of the U.S. Senate. Throughout his eighteen years in office, Bradley approached his role as a legislator who writes laws, a leader who shapes national opinion, and an advocate who fights bureaucracy on behalf of individual citizens. Bradley used his Senate platform to speak passionately about the unresolved dilemma of race and the need to promote racial healing. After departing from the Senate, Bradley served as chair of the National Civic League, worked on international issues at J.P. Morgan & Co., and advised the Advertising Counsel. In 2000, Bradley ran for the Democratic nomination for President.

Well, you can guess what happened. About three weeks later, the UPS truck pulls up in front of our house. And the guy gets out of the UPS truck and he's carrying a big box, and he walks that box up to our front steps and he puts that box down. My wife goes out, looks at the box, comes back in, and says "Bill, what is that big box out there with the dog in it?" And I look out there, and there's a box. It has a dog in it, and on the outside of the box is an envelope and on the envelope it says, "from Joe Pell." And I open the envelope, and there's a note inside and the note says "Bradley, don't get too attached to this dog."

So, I think that's good advice for a politician too – not to get too attached to your job. Because you never know when it's going to end. Always be responsive to people; always be listening to people; always go to where people are and live; go so they can share with you who they are and what their hopes are and what their dreams are. Do not presume you can read things in the newspaper or in staffing memos. Go and listen to the people themselves and then you won't lose your dog.

Now what I'd like to do tonight is tell you a little bit about who I am, where I come from, and what I'm going to do if I'm elected president of the United States.

I grew up in a small town, as Reverend Watley said. He used to come down there to St. Louis and visit people on the other side of that highway in Festus. Crystal City was a town of about 3,492 people. There were 96 in my high school graduating class, and the town had one stop light. It was a factory town. It was a multiracial, multiethnic town. It was a town where the Little League was integrated before the schools were integrated. It was a town where, before I was 12 years old, I traveled with the Little League baseball team to somewhere in southwestern Missouri for some regional championship. And we'd be staying at the third rate hotel because the other hotels wouldn't accept African American players, and we were all going to stay together as a team. A few years later with an American Legion baseball team, we'd go down to the southern part of Arkansas. We'd go to get a hamburger after the game, we wouldn't be served unless all of our players were served, and we walked out of more than one restaurant in that time.

It was a town where family shaped individuals. And my father – I guess these days we'd call him disabled. He had calcified arthritis in his lower spine. I never saw him tie his shoes or throw a ball or drive a car. My mother and I helped him get dressed every morning and helped him get undressed every evening. At age 21 he went to work at the bank in that small town, and over 40 years he worked his way up – after beginning in what he said his job was shining pennies, he worked his way up until he was the majority shareholder in that small town bank. And as most sons ask their fathers at one time or another, I once asked him, "What was your proudest moment?" He said that his proudest moment was that throughout the Great Depression he never

foreclosed on a single house. He found a way of working with people. And the other thing he said is you could never tell by a person's skin color whether a person was going to repay a loan. In other words, character is what counts.

I left that small town and came east. I went to college, and through my junior and senior year in college, I was an intern in Washington. I happened to be in the Senate chamber the night in 1964 Civil Rights Act passed – the law that desegregated those public accommodations that our team was denied entry into at a much younger age. And as I stood in this corner of the Senate chamber – as an intern I snuck in – and watched the votes being cast, I thought to myself, something happened tonight that made America a better place – not just for African-Americans or Latino Americans or Asian Americans but for all Americans. And the thought occurred to me that maybe someday I could be in the United State Senate and help make America a better place.

So throughout my 18 years in the Senate I tried to honor that commitment. Whether it was fighting for Medicaid coverage for children who were poor,¹ increasing the Earned Income Tax Credit,² or fighting for Title I to go into districts of urban poverty.³ Whether it was trying to make sure that they had Title XX day care funds for children who were poor,⁴ whether it was Head Start,⁵ or whether it was the empowerment zones of the mid 1990s.⁶

I also supported affirmative action and tried to stand up to the Reagan and Bush administrations when they decided to support segregated schools, or when they tried to play the practices of politics and they tried to play one group off of another.⁷

And from time to time, I would also go to the Senate floor and talk about the issue of race – to demonstrate that a white face can talk about race without vaporizing before your eyes.⁸ And I'm still here.

I remember one episode in particular – some of you might recall it. It's part of the justice battle. The issue was Rodney King. Remember Rodney King was stopped by the Los Angeles police department and was beaten 56 blows in two minutes? Nobody said it was happening – I've heard that before – nobody said it was happening until they caught it on a film. And they showed it on film. And it went all over the country. And after I saw that

1. 136 CONG. REC. §§17,512-01, 17,557 (1990); 136 CONG. REC. §1,833-03 (1990).

2. 141 CONG. REC. §15,707-02 (1995).

3. 136 CONG. REC. §§6,307-01, 6,311 (1990).

4. 137 CONG. REC. §§6,858-01, 6,866 (1991).

5. 137 CONG. REC. §§4,837-02, 4,875 (1991).

6. 139 CONG. REC. §5,470-03 (1993).

7. 137 CONG. REC. §10,465-05 (1991).

8. 137 CONG. REC. §9,410-01 (1991) (speaking on the state of race relations in America); 137 CONG. REC. §10,465-05 (1991) (calling on President Bush to bring out the issue of race relations); *See also* Bill Bradley for President, at <http://www.billbradley.com> (last visited Feb. 20, 2000) [hereinafter Bradley Website].

episode on television, and after the jury handed down its verdict, I said, “I have to go over to the Senate floor and make my voice count. This is a time when a white face should be on the floor of United States Senate talking about this issue.”

So, I went over the floor. “What was I going to say,” I thought, “to dramatize this issue? How could I dramatize this issue to the broadest number of Americans?” And so I decided not to use words – but instead took six pencils, borrowed a watch, put it on the table and said, “What happened in California, not so long ago was the following: Rodney King was beaten with police batons. Fifty-six blows in two minutes.” And then – (taps pencil fifty-six times).⁹ The whole place was silent. The point was made. The predictable happened. The following week I got a lot of hate mail, but I also got a lot of wonderful mail. I got a letter from one man in Philadelphia who had written a symphony after seeing that speech and he called it “56 Blows.”

As a candidate for president of the United States, I opened this campaign in a community development center in Newark. And said that one of the major issues I was going to be fighting for was to reduce child poverty.

The first speech I made as a candidate for president of the United State at Cooper Union was about race.¹⁰ And I continued to make those speeches. Not just at the NAACP or the Urban League or in the House of Justice, but wherever I was.

And I remember in Iowa, a couple of months ago, I was up there and I made this speech, and afterwards I was in the home of a professor at a university. And he came up and asked me, “Why are you making a speech about racial unity to a group of white Iowans?” I said, “Why not make it to you? I make it everywhere else.”

In March of this year, I was in Austin, Texas. There was a bill before the state legislature. It was an anti-hate crimes bill.¹¹ It said there would be an additional penalty if someone committed an act of violence based upon race, gender, sexual orientation, or disability.¹² I heard the governor of Texas didn’t want to sign this bill – didn’t want to have to deal with this bill. Wanted to deep-six it in a committee. So what I did was call a press conference with all the local state house press corps. And I said to the state house press corps, “If I’m the Democratic nominee for president of the United States, and he is the Republican nominee for president of the United States, and if he is still is not supporting this bill, I will make this an issue in the presidential campaign.”

9. 138 CONG. REC. §5266-03 (1992). *See also* Bradley website, *supra* note 8.

10. Bill Bradley, *Speech by Bill Bradley on Race Relations in America*, at Bradley website, *supra* note 8.

11. 1999 Tex. Gen. Laws 1589.

12. *Id.*

What I'm saying is that racial unity is not for me a political position. It's who I am. It's what I believe. It's what I care most about. It's one of the main motivations for me being in politics in the first place. And the premise of my campaign is that way over 50 percent of the white American population believe as I do – that we'd like to get to a time in America when, in Toni Morrison's words, "Race exists, but it doesn't matter."¹³

I think we're in a time when we need a particular kind of leadership. There's a story told about Albert Einstein. Albert Einstein was giving a graduate physics exam in college. One of the students came up to him and said, "Professor Einstein, the question on this year's exam is same as the question on last year's exam?" To which Einstein replied, "That's ok, this year the answers are different." And if you look around the room today, the answers are different practically every day.

We're facing multiple changes, globalization, technological changes, change in military threats, change in the origin and nature of immigration, change in the family structure, in our country today.¹⁴ And one of the challenges for somebody who runs for president is to give the American people a narrative – a story – where they can locate themselves in the midst of this change, and believe they can get at piece of the prosperity. Believe that we can live up to the ideals of our founders. And believe that in our lives, they can find some meaning in life that's deeper than material things.

Well, I was out campaigning for about three months and somebody said, "What would you like your legacy to be?" And I thought that was a little premature, right? You have to get the nomination, you have to get elected, then you've got to serve with distinction, then you've got to die – and then you can have a legacy. But it focused my attention. What would I like my legacy to be? And I thought, well I'd like my legacy to be that I presided over a country in peace with growing respect from people around the world for who we are, for our society, our culture, our economy, our political process. I'd like to be the protector of the natural environment. I'd like to be the good steward of a good economy, but an economy that brings more and more people to higher ground. Brings the small businessman in Harlem to higher ground, as well as the family farmer in Iowa to higher ground. An economy where you cannot rest and be proud of how it's performing unless more and more Americans get to higher economic ground. And then there's the issue that strikes my heart the most: I'd like to know that because of what we did over four or eight years, that every child in America – every child – has the chance to realize their full potential.

13. Bill Bradley, *Bill Bradley for President: Bill Bradley on Racial Unity*, at Bradley website, *supra* note 8.

14. *See generally* KENICHI OHMAE, *THE BORDERLESS WORLD* (Harper Business, 1990).

A friend of mine – some of you might know a story like this – told me a story about a teacher going into an urban classroom. Twenty kids in the class. Asks the question, “How many of you had a big breakfast today?” Ten kids raised their hands. “How many of you had any breakfast today?” Six kids raised their hand. “What about the other four of you?” Uncertain, self-conscious, they looked at each other, and finally one little girl raised her hand and said, “It wasn’t my turn to eat today.”

There are still 14 million children in America who live in poverty.¹⁵ There are still 45 million people in America without any health insurance.¹⁶ With an economy as good as ours – that is likely to be better and better when technology and globalization take off – the question is, how can we make sure that more people in America have health care and that fewer children in America live in poverty?

And last, racial unity. As I said, it’s who I am, what I believe. What I care most deeply about. Because it’s not only a picture of who we are today, but a picture of who we can become as well. But we can’t begin to speak about racial unity until we begin to speak honestly about race, ethnicity, and urban America. Because our future is inextricably entwined. People say, “Why are you so interested in racial unity all the time?” I say, “Well, where’s your morality? Do you believe you’re your brother’s keeper? If you do, you’ve got to walk your talk. Do you believe we have the capacity as no other nation has and lead the world by the power of an example of a multi-racial society that works? Then we’ve got work to do.”

But if neither morality nor world leadership convince you, try self-interest. Because by the year 2010, less than 60 percent of the people who enter the work force in America are going to be native-born white Americans.¹⁷ And that means that the economic future of the children of white Americans will depend more and more on the talent of non-white Americans.¹⁸ And that’s not ideology. That’s demographics. That’s the facts.

This much I know: Timid leadership and the silence of good people will cause us to risk losing another generation who won’t participate or benefit from this new economy. It’s morally unacceptable. And it’s economically perilous to continue on this course.

So what would I do, beyond reducing child poverty and increasing the number of people with health care in America?

15. U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, U.S. DEP’T OF COMMERCE, *POVERTY IN THE UNITED STATES* (1999).

16. Bill Bradley, *Bill Bradley for President: Bill Bradley on Health Care*, at Bradley website, *supra* note 8.

17. Bill Bradley, *Speech to National Association of Black State Legislators* (Dec. 2, 1999), at Bradley website, *supra* note 8.

18. BILL BRADLEY, *TIME PRESENT, TIME PAST* 391 (1996).

The first thing I'd do is stand up to the NRA.¹⁹ Ever since 1968, when I saw Bobby Kennedy on the floor of the Ambassador Hotel in a pool of blood, when I saw that picture, I thought to myself that a president of the United States should ban Saturday Night Specials. That's the first thing I'd do.

The second thing I'd do is make sure that every handgun in America – every handgun in America – has to be registered and licensed just like we do with cars.²⁰ If we can do it with cars, why can't we do it with handguns?

The next thing, I would take gun dealer out of residential neighborhoods.²¹ It's a lot easier for a kid to get access to a gun if they just have to go down the block to the basement where a guy has an arsenal that he's selling, as opposed to having to do it in a commercially zoned area.

I say if you pass a gun to somebody else, then that shouldn't be a misdemeanor; that should be a felony.²² I say if you buy a gun at a gun show, you ought to have a background check just like if you bought it at a dealer. Those are just a few things.

Now what about participation? I want to broaden participation in the democratic process. Al Sharpton has registered thousands of people in New York. But you know, you have to ask yourself a question: Why is the right to vote the only right that has an obstacle to the course of people exercising it? When you are a new citizen, you take an exam for citizenship. You are asked, "What's the most important right?" Some people say the right to religion is most important. Some people say the right to speak is the most important. But the answer on the exam is the right to vote. And that means we should put obstacle in the way of people having to vote. We shouldn't have to have people like Al Sharpton and others dedicated to work to register Americans. If we had same-day voter registrations like they do in Minnesota²³— where people can go to the polls and register the day they are there – or if we had voting by mail like they have in Oregon,²⁴ we could get tens of thousand of more people who don't vote, and have a lot more participation in the process – where in 1996, only 25 percent of the people elected Bill Clinton president of the United States.²⁵ So that's what I'd do. I'd take money out of politics. Everybody knows – it's supposed to be one man, one vote? It's not one man,

19. Bill Bradley, *Bill Bradley for President: Bill Bradley on Gun Control Measures*, at Bradley website, *supra* note 8.

20. Bill Bradley, *Bill Bradley for President: Bill Bradley Proposes Gun Control Measures*, at Bradley website, *supra* note 8.

21. *Id.*

22. *Id.*

23. Bill Bradley, *Bill Bradley for President: Bill Bradley's Record on Voting Rights*, at Bradley website, *supra* note 8.

24. *Id.*

25. *The 1996 Presidential Election Year Results*, available at <http://www.hq.nasa.gov/office/legaff/special.htm>.

one vote – people with the bigger money have the bigger clout. I believe in public financing of general elections, so ideas would count, not access to money.

Then, of course, there are the schools. You know, when FDR was president of the United States, during the depression, he said, “I’m going to try one thing. If that doesn’t work, I’m going to try something else. If that doesn’t work, I’m going to try something else. But I know I’m going to stick to it, and it’s going to work, and I’m going to try until it works.” That’s how I feel about education. Ever since I worked for the Urban League’s Street Academy on 116th Street back in 1967, I’ve said to myself, this has got to work.

And then finally, we’ve got to help families, so we can help those kids. What does that mean? It means increasing the minimum wage. It means making sure it’s easier to be represented by a union, so you can get more leverage in the process and make a little more money. It means those things. We have to think about who the lowest paid workers are in America. The lowest paid workers in America are those who care for children, are those who care for elderly parents when they’re dying. Those are the lowest paid people in America. In February of 1999 in Los Angeles, the Service Employees International Union on one day announced that they had successfully organized 80,000 home health care workers, which means that they’ll have a better chance of getting a better wage, they’ll have a better chance of getting better child care, they’ll get a better chance of having a better life for their family.²⁶ That’s the kind of policy that I think has to be followed.

We all talk about politics, about economics, but we all know the issue is also about justice. This is the House of Justice. No justice – [crowd responds] no peace. You know, I kind of like that. And that means that we’re going to have to do something to enforce existing laws. That means we’ll have to streamline the EEOC so we get action on job discrimination. That means another thing. That means the marketing is on the right track. That means in a country where anyone spending millions of dollars on advertising in the African American community, with only 30 percent of that spent on African American radio and television stations, is simply not acceptable.

And if I were president of the United States, here’s what would happen. When Reagan was president, if you wanted to please the boss, what did you do? You talked about increasing defense expenditures and fighting communists. If I’m president and you want to please the boss, you’re going to have to show how in your life, in your business, in your department, you’re increasing racial understanding in this country. And that means there would not be an item in the federal budget with billion dollars to communicate, where

26. Steven Greenhouse, *Growth in Unions: Membership was the Best In Two Decades* (Jan. 20, 2000), available at <http://www.zmag.org/LaborWatch.htm>.

a chunk of that money wouldn't go to African American radio stations who are trying to reach the people.

There's a story told about three stonecutters in the Middle Ages and they're building a giant cathedral. Each one was asked, "What are you doing?" And the first stone cutter said, "What am I doing? Well, I'm cutting a stone one foot by one foot and three-fourths out of these larger stones, and I'm laying them next to each other, day after day; the same thing day after day, and I'm frustrated and I'm bored." The second stone cutter – "What are you doing?" And the second stone cutter said, "With those stones, one foot by one foot and three-fourths out of this larger stone, and I line them up, and I build a wall. And for that I get paid. With that money, I take care of my family and we have a wonderful family life." The third stone cutter – "What do you do?" And the third stone cutter said, "I am building a holy lighthouse that will last for 1,000 years."

Which of those stone cutters are you? If more of us can answer that question, and we're building a holy lighthouse, the better chance we all have.

As I look around this room, I see Wyatt Tee Walker.²⁷ That man stood with Martin Luther King through the thick and the thin, fought with him all the way for justice, and continues to fight for justice. I see Mayor Koch,²⁸ seated in a room with the father of Yusuf Hawkins.²⁹ I see this picture, and I see healing. I see healing. I see Al Sharpton,³⁰ somebody who experienced

27. The Rev. Dr. Wyatt Tee Walker is senior pastor of the Canaan Baptist Church of Christ in Harlem. Walker worked with King to further the civil rights movement in the 1960s and is considered one of his historians. He is an authority on the music of the African-American religious experience and has traveled widely as a human rights activist. He is world commissioner of the Program to Combat Racism of the World Council of Churches and is president of the American Committee of Africa and on the consortium for the Central Harlem Development. See Wyatt Tee Walker, at <http://www.aalbc.com/wyatttee.htm>.

28. Edward Irving Koch was born in 1924 in the Bronx, and received his law degree from <http://www.ci.nyc.ny.us/html/nyc100/html/mayors.html#Koch>. New York University in 1948. Koch was elected Mayor of New York City in 1977. Since leaving office, he practices law in New York City, authors books, has hosted his own radio show, and served as a television judge on "The People's Court." See *Mayors of New York City Since 1989*, at <http://www.ci.nyc.ny.us/html/nyc100/html/mayors.html#Koch>.

29. Hawkins, age 16, was slain by a gang of white youths in August of 1989 when he and three black friends went to predominately-white Bensonhurst in New York to look at a used car. Merle English & Mitch Gelman, *From Bensonhurst, In Unity*, NEWS DAY, June 10, 1990, at 3. See also, *Ringleader of Mob Apologizes to Parents of Yusuf Hawkins*, available at http://hy.yahoo.com/external/wcbs_radio/sports/stories/8973895163.html.

30. The Rev. Al Sharpton was born in 1954 in Brooklyn, New York. He became an ordained minister at the age of ten. Sharpton has been actively involved in the Civil Rights Movement in his late 20's and serves as the director of the United African Movement. See Al Sharpton, at <http://www.msnbc.com/news/114193.asp?cpl=1>. See also, AL SHARPTON & ANTHONY WALTON, *GO AND TELL THE PHAROH: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF THE REVEREND AL SHARPTON* (1996).

violence when he was stabbed in a march in Bensonhurst not so many years ago, and then went into the courtroom to ask for leniency for his assailant.

I see healing. I see the possibility for change that is positive, and healing and bringing people together in very special ways, so they respect our common humanity and work toward a common objective. It is important in our lives to stay the following: “The tragedy is not to die; the tragedy is to die with commitments undefined, with convictions unexpressed, and with service unfulfilled.” I know what my commitments are – I made them a long time ago. I know what my convictions are – I’ve been speaking about them for a lifetime. The only question remaining is the service yet unfulfilled. And the answer to that question is not with me, but with you.

Thank you very much.