

**Institute for Conflict Analysis  
and Resolution**

**Occasional Paper 8**

**Cities After the 1960s—  
Where Have All the Promises Gone?**

**By  
Roger Wilkins  
Robinson Professor  
George Mason University**

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**George Mason University**

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## About the Author

Roger Wilkins is a Clarence J. Robinson Professor of History and American Culture at George Mason University and a network radio commentator with National Public Radio. Professor Wilkins was named George Mason University Distinguished Faculty Member of the Year for 1990-91. He earned his undergraduate and law degrees from the University of Michigan.

Professor Wilkins was assistant director of the U.S. Community Relations Service from 1964 to 1966 and assistant attorney general of the United States from 1966 to 1969. After spending several years with the Ford Foundation, he was on the editorial staffs of *The Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Star* and served as a network radio commentator for CBS News and the Mutual Broadcasting System.

Professor Wilkins shared the Pulitzer Prize in 1972 for Watergate coverage with Woodward, Bernstein, and Herblock and was chairman of the Pulitzer Prize Board in 1988. He holds seven honorary degrees and was the national coordinator of Nelson Mandela's 1990 visit to the United States. His highly acclaimed autobiography, *A Man's Life* (1982), was reprinted in 1991, and he was co-editor with Fred Harris of *Quiet Riots* in 1988. He is also a columnist for *Mother Jones*, has published articles in two dozen magazines, and written at least sixty book reviews and Op/Ed pieces for major American newspapers. Professor Wilkins also conceived, wrote, and narrated two *Frontline* documentaries—"Keeping the Faith" in 1987 and "Throwaway People" in 1989.

## About the Institute

The Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University has as its principal mission to advance the understanding and resolution of significant and persistent human conflicts among individuals, groups, communities, identity groups, and nations. To fulfill this mission, the Institute works in four areas: academic programs, consisting of a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) and a Master of Science (M.S.) in Conflict Analysis and Resolution; research and publication; a clinical and consultancy service offered through the Applied Practice and Theory Program and by individual Institute faculty and senior associates; and public education.

The Applied Practice and Theory (APT) Program draws on faculty, practitioners, and students to form teams to analyze and help resolve broad areas of conflict. These three-to-five-year projects currently address such topics as crime and conflict, jurisdictional conflicts within governments, conflict resolution in deeply divided communities (Northern Ireland, South Africa, Beirut), and conflict in school systems.

Associated with the Institute are a number of organizations that promote and apply conflict resolution principles. These include the Consortium on Peace Research, Education, and Development (COPRED), a networking organization; the National Conference on Peacemaking and Conflict Resolution (NCPCR), offering a biannual conference for conflict resolution practitioners; Northern Virginia Mediation Service (NVMS), offering mediation services to Northern Virginia residents involved in civil or minor criminal disputes; and Starting Small, teaching conflict resolution and problem-solving skills to children.

Major research interests include the study of deep-rooted conflict and its resolution; the exploration of conditions attracting parties to the negotiation table; the role of third parties in dispute resolution; and the testing of a variety of conflict intervention methods in a range of community, national, and international settings.

Outreach to the community is accomplished through the publication of books and articles, public lectures, conferences, and special briefings on the theory and practice of conflict resolution. As part of this effort, the Institute's Working and Occasional Papers offer both the public at large and professionals in the field access to critical thinking flowing from faculty, staff, and students at the Institute.

These papers are presented to stimulate critical consideration of important questions in the study of human conflict.

## Foreword

The Institute's Sixth Annual Lynch Lecture, reproduced here as an ICAR Occasional Paper, was simultaneously a major public event for ICAR and an occasion for looking back and remembering. Part of the remembering arose from the fact that the lecture was delivered by an old and valued friend of the Institute, Professor Roger Wilkins, and that he had chosen as his theme to look back on the sources of conflict in the country's cities since the 1960s. This paper shows that he did so in a powerful and moving way.

The other part of the remembering arose through the fact that Roger chose to weave into his remarks about the cities and the post-1960s some reminiscences of his work with Jim Laue, the Institute's Lynch Professor of Conflict Analysis and Resolution, who died in September 1993 at a tragically early age. Jim Laue delivered the very first Lynch Lecture the year he joined the Institute (then the Center) and then—typically for Jim—neglected to prepare this very first Lecture for publication, in order to get on with his teaching, his research, and (particularly) his work for social change throughout the country. We have managed to complete Jim's editing work for him, and his Occasional Paper was published on the day of Roger Wilkins' own Lynch Lecture.

The interesting theme that ties together all these varied events, and which comes through clearly in Roger Wilkins' lecture, is that of social change—or lack of it! As another former Lynch Lecturer used to argue, the resolution of conflict, as opposed to its temporary settlement, frequently must involve major social change and the careful costing of alternative courses of action to deal with the kinds of problems Professor Wilkins describes in his talk. Conflict resolution, surely, deals with the underlying causes, not the surface manifestations, of social conflict. It deals with the reasons for protracted and violent conflict. It looks at the deep roots of conflicts and tries to confront these roots and change them. Both Jim Laue's and Roger Wilkins' Lynch Lectures deal with this theme and confront these problems. So do both of their lives.

*Christopher R. Mitchell, Director  
The Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution*

## Introduction

*The following remarks were made by Richard E. Rubenstein in his introduction of Roger Wilkins at the Sixth Annual Lynch Lecture at George Mason University on December 3, 1993.*

In Europe, it is not so unusual to discover men and women who manage somehow to be political activists, philosophers, professionals, journalists, teachers, public officials, and artists, all more or less at the same time. One thinks of Sartre and de Beauvoir, Disraeli and Vaclav Havel. In the United States, it is harder to discover figures like this. But we are privileged to hear from such a person tonight.

Roger Wilkins began his career as a lawyer working in New York City, having already graduated from the University of Michigan with A.B. and J.D. degrees. He went from private law to public law in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, where he served first with the Agency for International Development and then with the Community Relations Service of the U.S. Department of Justice before becoming assistant attorney general of the United States. All of this took place from the late 1950s until the late 1960s—one of the stormiest and most transformative periods in the American history.

In 1969, Roger went into philanthropy, working for the Ford Foundation as program officer in charge of Social Development, then as assistant to the president of the Foundation. But a journalistic career beckoned. During the 1970s, Roger worked for *The Washington Post* as a member of the editorial page staff, for the *New York Times* as a columnist and member of the editorial board, and then for the *Washington Star*. In the 1980s, he was a network radio commentator for CBS News and then a commentator for the Mutual Broadcasting System. He has been with National Public Radio as a commentator since the early 1990s.

With all of this activity, Roger found time to write some remarkable books. James Baldwin called his autobiography, *A Man's Life*, "a most beautiful book"—and Baldwin was right! Most recently, he wrote a fine study of the urban crisis with Fred Harris—a book called *Quiet Riots*—as well as continuing his writing for journals and his television commentaries.

But all of this really skirts the surface of Roger Wilkins' career. Like a bass line underpinning and organizing all the other melodies of his active life is the project of social change. Roger has never forgotten that "What you are is God's gift to you. What you become is your gift to

God." And so, he has dedicated his life's energies to the twinned causes of African-American and human liberation.

It is impossible to summarize Roger's political activities, but they have included advising Rev. Jesse Jackson in two presidential campaigns; coordinating Nelson Mandela's 1990 visit to the United States; serving on the boards of the University of the District of Columbia, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, and the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law; working arduously for the American Civil Liberties Union; and maintaining his important and creative relationship with the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, D.C. It was our luck at George Mason University to snare him as a Robinson Professor. Roger was Distinguished Faculty Member of the Year at this university in 1990-91.

Roger Wilkins inspires us all not only because of what he has done but also because of what he has *not* done: he has not for a minute given up the fight for a peaceful, just, and egalitarian society. When one looks at today's society, at the violence that continues to rend the planet, the scandalous inequalities of wealth, power, and dignity that divide humankind, the slow holocaust consuming the impoverished youth of American cities, there is every reason to say, "Well, it has been a good try, but it didn't work. It has been a good try, but maybe in a few centuries things will be better. It has been a good try, but right now, I'm tired."

Roger could say that, but he doesn't. He believes that people with vision, determination, and practical skill can help solve these problems—and not in a few centuries but soon. Soon! Thanks to Roger Wilkins and a few men and women like him, we also are emboldened to keep the faith that our world can be changed radically for the better.

It is my pleasure to introduce our Lynch Lecturer for 1993, my friend, Roger Wilkins.

Sixth Annual Vernon M. and Minnie I. Lynch Lecture

Address by

Roger Wilkins

Robinson Professor of History and American Culture

George Mason University

December 3, 1993

### **Cities After the 1960s— Where Have All the Promises Gone?**

Rich, thank you very much. That was overly generous, but I liked it. Chris, Ed and Helen Lynch, colleagues, friends, I am really glad to be at George Mason tonight, which is a weird thing for a faculty member to say on a Friday night.

As Rich was talking, I was transported back home to Grand Rapids, Michigan, where I went a few years ago to receive an award, which moved me very much. They said all these nice things about me, and then I was introduced very much the way Rich just introduced me. I stood up, and my mother was sitting at a table right in front of me. She was then in her early eighties. Mothers are important to black boys, and it does not matter if you're 58 or 59 years old, as I was then; your mama can still make you feel like a little boy. Well, at that point, Mama was looking like a storm cloud. So, I started my speech, and she kept on looking like a storm cloud. So I raised the level of my game. Her expression didn't change. I got a couple of interruptions for applause. Her face was still grim. I finished the speech, people gave me a standing ovation. Mama still looked like a storm cloud. I quickly went down to her and asked, "Mama, what is wrong with you?" She said, "That introduction." I said, "What is wrong with the introduction?" She said, "Sounds like you can't hold a job."

Tonight, my friend and double colleague Jim Laue is very much on my mind. When Jim came to work with us at the Community Relations Service, I gave him a lot of grief about being a Harvard guy. "What can a Harvard guy know about anything? It is tough down there in the South, Jim. That is not a place for Harvard boys." As a matter of fact, the last time I gave him grief about being a Harvard guy, he was getting me to make this lecture. Chris Mitchell and I were standing with Jim in the commencement line. And Jim had on his Harvard robes. My wife went to Harvard and is a professor and wears one of those Harvard robes. And, finally, I said, "You know, Jim, wearing that thing, you look like my

wife.” For the first time in the 25 years I knew that guy, he did not have an answer. He just looked funny.

Jim Laue was the first Lynch Lecturer, he was my colleague in the 1960s when there was—for a moment—there was extraordinary promise in the American air. Jim is alive in my heart and head a lot and surely right now, with a smile on his face, looking at me—and his brain and his spirit at work in his words, explaining, exhorting, and amusing.

Jim and I—a white guy and a black guy, and some other black people, and white people, in a small agency, in the United States government, in the 1960s, when the cities were being ripped apart—had hopes that the American city would be renewed as a place of great justice and democracy.

The promise for the cities in the 1960s was that America had taken an honest look at its racial history. The country was rich then and growing and vital. Some people thought that America had experienced a profound change of heart and that justice could be purchased with our bountiful growth. We were then experiencing a continual period of low inflation, low unemployment, and steadily growing gross national product. I remember I was upbraided once after I had given a speech by a man who said, “We will have justice out of growth. America is never a zero-sum game. We will always grow. Out of our bounty, we will have justice.” Well, unfortunately it did not turn out that way.

Some of us had strong suspicions—Jim and I, Wally Warfield among them—that there was less promise and more foreboding in our sixties experiences. From the things that we had seen in the cities all across the country, I had profound doubts that the humane trajectory of the early sixties could be sustained in the cauldrons of despair deep in our inner cities. There was too much animosity toward the people there. There was too much poverty. There was too much human devastation. And, there was too little will and money to be marshalled against those things. So, I left the federal government almost exactly 25 years ago, making the same warnings in speech after speech.

There were really two warnings. First, if we do not change our national investment patterns, our cities will become blacker and poorer, and that will be a disaster for our nation. Second, if we continue to treat people like savages, they will become savages, and raising groups of savages in the middle of the central points of growth and renewal of a culture is a wonderful way for a civilization to commit suicide. Now, 25 years later, the forebodings have clearly outdistanced the promise.

One would have to be a fool to say that we have not experienced unbelievable racial progress in the United States over that last sixty or seventy years. I surely cannot say that we have not made progress. I was born 61 1/2 years ago in a segregated hospital. I started my education in a one-room, segregated schoolhouse. My father is buried in a segregated cemetery. He was a brilliant man, the only man I have ever known who read Shakespeare just for pleasure. And yet, when he died in 1941 he was not good enough to lie dead with white people. And he never—with a powerful mind and a great spirit and a wonderful sense of humor—could transcend the segregated life to which he was consigned. He never worked for anything but a black publication in a black part of Kansas City, Missouri. My father could not, on his deathbed, in 1941, have imagined Colin Powell. He could not have imagined the success that has come to Oprah Winfrey or to Toni Morrison. As a journalist, he could not have imagined that his little boy would someday be the chair of the Pulitzer Prize Board. So I do not tell you that America has not changed, and that progress has not occurred; it has.

When I tell you, however, that in the sixties, when I worked with Wally Warfield and with Jim Laue, I went to virtually every riot there was—from Watts in 1965 to the riots that occurred after Dr. King’s death—all over this country. And in the ensuing 25 years, I have seen what has happened to American cities. They have become blacker and poorer.

I do not know of a single American city that I knew in 1968, 1967, 1966, or 1969, that is not a worse place to live now, than it was back then. I live in the same neighborhood that I lived in when Jim and I worked together. There are poor people, and there are rich people in my neighborhood. There are senators, and there are people who buy their groceries with food stamps. I like my neighborhood. I never wanted my children to grow up deprived of the opportunity to see the whole range of humanity including poor black people. And so, my little girl, who is ten years old, is seeing the same kinds of people that my older children saw, and she is developing the same kind of empathy that her adult siblings have.

But this week, *this week*, a woman was raped three doors down from where we live. That did not happen in the sixties. A few times a year, murders occur within a half mile of our house. That did not happen in the sixties. People have alarms on their houses and bars on their windows. They did not have to have such security in the sixties. There are guards in the Safeway. I pay for that service with the price of my grapefruit. Life is courser and more difficult. We are fearful now.

Well, what happened? It seems to me that our history caught up with us and bit off our dream. And our history is very powerful. I see one of my students here so he will remember this arithmetic. The first written recorded history of Africans on the North American continent occurred in August 1619. We have had 374 years of contact between Africa and North America. For two-thirds of that 374-year period, we had slavery. Another 100 years was semi-slavery and constitutionalized racial subordination. Over ninety percent of our interracial history has been slavery and legalized racial subordination—over ninety percent! We have only had 28 years of something else. That something else has not been equality. It just has been different and somewhat better.

There are two very powerful forces in that history. One is that the souls of white folks have settled fully and comfortably into the privileges of whiteness. The privileges of whiteness—there are lots of them: economic privileges, sexual privileges, psychological privileges. The psychological privilege of knowing that you can never fall below the state of a black person is very powerful, as Andrew Hacker has noted in his splendid book, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal*.

The second force is the revulsion about black people and the profound doubts that so many people have about our human capacities. There is a third force, and that is the damage. Those two forces sum up the damage that our history has done to white people, but the final force is the damage it has done to black people, and that damage is enormous.

But, as a result of that history, as a result of the white American reluctance to let go of racial privilege, we developed in the seventies and eighties the politics of resentment about the threats to white privilege that the sixties had raised. Three phrases will give you snapshots of the politics of resentment: “law and order,” “forced busing,” “reverse discrimination.” They were buttressed by their allies: “crime in the streets,” “welfare queen,” “Willie Horton.” The race card was played in Southern elections for years and years before the sixties. The Southern politicians did it promiscuously. It was not done in the North. We thought it was a Southern thing; that only those barbarians in the South riled up their rednecks in their wool hats that way.

George Wallace in his 1968 and 1972 campaigns showed Northerners that the race card could be played in Michigan and Colorado and California because a lot of whites resented the erosion of the privileges of whiteness that the equal opportunity thrusts of the sixties had generated. So now, both parties play it in national elections. It is a bipartisan game now. Ronald Reagan had his welfare queen and his food stamp jokes. George Bush had Willie Horton; Bill Clinton had

Sister Souljah. It was the same card played three different ways. Bill Clinton, who is slicker and smoother, talked about welfare and crime and the need for personal responsibility. He was not talking to black people about welfare and crime. And even when he was ostensibly talking to black people about personal responsibility, he was really delivering a message above their heads to white people about how in tune he was with their attitudes about blacks.

I got off the subway during the campaign in Bethesda, Maryland. A white lady handed me a flyer. She said, “Are you a Democrat?” I said, “Yes.” She handed me a flyer. It was headed: “Bill Clinton and Al Gore on Welfare and Crime.” Well, I did not know that welfare and crime were problems in Bethesda, Maryland. But, I read the welfare and crime program of Bill Clinton, put out by the Kensington, Maryland, Democrats. There’s not much welfare in Kensington, and precious little crime. But the way to stir up negative feelings in Kensington about black people who live miles and miles away is to talk about crime and welfare. The Clinton campaign had decided that it needed a race card to firm up the suburban vote. The flyer was it. It was not as crude as Reagan’s welfare queen or Bush’s Willie Horton—but it *was* the race card.

So now, in the eighties and nineties—as opposed to the sixties when the national government was preaching to us and teaching us that racism was bad; that we must purge ourselves of our ancient evil—we now get winks and nods that condone and play to our racism from our national leaders.

After we got that kind of politics, the bottom of the economy fell apart. From 1973 on, the economy stagnated, and for the people at the bottom, there was disaster. According to MIT Economics Professor Lester Thurow, from 1973 to 1992, the bottom sixty percent of the male workers’ income dropped twenty percent. For unskilled blacks who did not drop out of the economy, the drop in income was forty percent. But hundreds of thousands, perhaps better than a million, dropped out, discouraged by a job market where unskilled positions were disappearing by the millions. The unemployment rate for black males since the seventies has never dropped below ten percent; during the eighties it averaged 13 percent.

Those little-noted economic facts have had hideous results in terms of crime and family disintegration. And they were occurring at the same time the federal government was reducing its share of city budgets from 18 percent in 1980 to six percent in 1992. So now there is a concerted conservative, neo-conservative, and new democrat assault on the black poor. The black poor are no longer said to be inferior as they were up



through the sixties. It is now said that it is their *behavior* that is abhorrent. So the president preaches personal responsibility to them without discussing the responsibility of American capital to American workers. All of this reminds me of George Bernard Shaw's observation in *Man and Superman*: "The haughty American nation forces the Negro to shine his shoes and disdains him because he is a bootblack."

People fall apart under economic stress. Every time we have a recession, we read stories in the newspaper about how white people who lose their jobs begin to drink heavily, begin to take drugs, begin to abuse their wives, begin to abuse their children, begin to commit suicide, and begin to have greater numbers of divorces. Well, black America has been in a depression, *depression*, for the last twenty years, so, of course, there are people who are behaving very, very badly. Well, what must we do about this? There are savages loose in our cities. There are children having children. There is social disintegration. What can we do?

I was busy developing a strategy that exhorted the country to develop a program called "Repairing the Black Family." Step one was to put blacks, particularly parents, back to work. Step two was to beef up the terrible schools poor black children attend and the devastated neighborhoods in which they live by surrounding their schools with multipurpose service centers that could save children, serve young parents, and build family strength.

I had it all sketched out. I made speeches about it. And I could have made a speech about it tonight. Then the full implications of the NAFTA debate hit me. Let me go back to Lester Thurow's words. "Between 1973 and 1992, the bottom sixty percent of male workers in America lost twenty percent of their income." We are not talking about black people now. The majority of workers Thurow is talking about are white. Thurow went on to write, "To put it bluntly, the American political process has lost sight of the economic well-being of the bottom sixty percent of its work force." That is a very powerful and damning statement. "The political process has lost sight of the economic well-being of the bottom sixty percent of its work force." He then pointed out that Clinton pitched his campaign at these people and then has ignored them since he became president. Thurow argues that the biggest need these people have is not deficit reduction or health care; it is good jobs. There is precious little discussion about jobs—creating jobs, giving jobs, making jobs—in our political discourse today. Why is that? I will tell you why I think it is.

I was talking earlier this evening to a young man who works at the Agency for International Development. I came to this town in May of

1962 to work as the assistant to the administrator of the Agency for International Development. I came full of the enthusiasm that you have seen on the television about the Kennedy years. Whatever the revisionists say about Kennedy, and whatever I say about Kennedy, and I say lots of bad things as my students can attest, the fact is that Kennedy did evoke an idealism and a will to service and a drive to serve our country. And it was a powerful one. My sense then was that there were politicians in Washington—for all of the old barons in the Congress—there were politicians in Washington who were in touch with the people back home. There was not all the money in politics that there is today. Today—to steal a phrase from the great Yugoslav writer Džigul—*Digilus*—we have a new political class in Washington created by this gigantic political money machine. If you read today's *Washington Post*, you will find that the polling firm headed by Stan Greenberg, the president's pollster, was paid \$840,000 by the Democratic National Committee for the first six months of 1993. There was not money like that in politics thirty years ago. K Street was not filled with rich lobbyists then. One can spend endless nights in Washington at elegant cocktail parties where the new political class is wining and dining your representatives and mine. All of those people live in a world in which nobody makes less than \$100,000 a year. It is a world in which they cannot really imagine people who live on \$35,000 a year. But our telemarketed politics is so expensive today that our politicians *have* to spend enormous amounts of time with the rich. Ordinary people just can't contribute enough to pay for the big-ticket campaigns that are required these days.

Washington really has, in a substantial way, lost touch with ordinary people and with real work and real aspirations and with real human pain and with the anxieties of people whose hands are slipping away from the American dream. The NAFTA debate laid all that out. NAFTA was in large measure about the safety of American capital in the global economy and about American access to Mexican labor. American labor tried to force a debate to ask where it was to be positioned in the new global economy.

A strong hint at the answer was given by an American corporate executive who was asked by a *New York Times* reporter what loyalty he felt his corporation owed its American workers. He replied: "We do have workers in Chillicothe, but we also have to worry about our workers in Kuala Lumpur. They have as much claim to us, and to our loyalties, as the workers in Chillicothe."

In post-NAFTA political commentary, arguments are beginning to be made that our government needs to develop some jobs programs. The great New York financier Felix Rohatyn has been making the argument as have Hobart Rowan, the financial columnist for the *Washington Post*, and Bob Herbert, the columnist for the *New York Times*.

It seems to me, however, that the problem is deeper than a jobs program, though God knows we need a major jobs program as a stop-gap measure. But a lot of Americans are slipping away from the American dream. Moreover, poor white women are beginning to follow the same single-mother poverty pattern that poor black women have been on for some time. We need urgently to seek ways to protect the standard of living in this country. One way of looking at it is to view the deteriorating standard of living as the post-Cold War national security threat.

It seems to me that our current predicament requires a rethinking of work, how to share it, how to reconfigure it, how to move toward a partial barter economy, how to generate jobs over the long term, and how to rethink the ways we use our national treasure. We also, obviously, have to rethink the way we educate the most vulnerable children in America. These things are not now on our national political agenda. But they must be. I have a friend named Bob Gale who was until very recently the president of the Association of Governing Boards of American Universities and Colleges, and Bob used to always say, “We need a change of heart in America.” And we do, because we need for our political process to become interested in that bottom sixty percent—to protect their standard of living and to provide them with interesting and useful tasks for their lives.

We are not really an egalitarian nation, you know. This is a society based on privilege. It has been built around economic privilege, gender privilege, and racial privilege. Our founders were all privileged men. We, in our nation, tend not to look back or look down for very long. We look up. We aspire upward and toward the future. The NAFTA debate was, as a matter of fact, described by some political analysts as Bill Clinton and the Democratic party realigning themselves so that they were aligned with winners and not with losers. The losers are those in the sixty percent. It seems to me, we, as Americans, need to think hard about what it is to be an American. What we owe to each other. What kind of lives are worthwhile to lead. Whether market values are good values for human beings to live by all the time, and, indeed, whether they are good values for a nation to live by all the time.

Clearly my thinking has gone beyond cities now and beyond race as well. Blacks were like the canaries in the mines, falling apart under unbearable economic pressure. Now, millions of whites are beginning to experience the dislocations created by globalization and deindustrialization. I think the NAFTA fight made a lot of white people understand better what is going on. There is a fragment from a sixties civil rights song that talks about blacks and whites together, and perhaps that is the hope. Lots of blacks and lots of whites together are in that bottom sixty percent.

In 1964, Senator Everett McKinley Dirksen of Illinois, the Republican leader in the Senate, said of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, “It is an idea whose time had come.” Perhaps because of the distress of that bottom sixty percent, black and white—perhaps the need of all able-bodied Americans for remunerative and meaningful work is a *movement* whose time has come. But, if that is to come to fruition, human beings will have to make it so. It will not happen by itself. People have to say to themselves, “I do not want to live in an America where sixty percent of the working people in the country lose ground and are disrespected.” The country has become so bifurcated, the ordinary people are hurt so badly, that they are open to the appeal of a demagogue who comes around with short quips, quirky answers, and an authoritarian personality. It is not the kind of country I want to live in. But when Benjamin Franklin came out of the Constitutional Convention at the end of the summer of 1787, he was asked by a woman, “Well, what have you created in there, Dr. Franklin?” He said, “It is a republic if you can keep it.” Well, it is up to us to keep it, it seems to me.

Rich said I have not given up, and I do not. I do get weary sometimes. I do feel badly sometimes. People say, “Well, how can you keep going?” I say, “Well, ancestor worship.” They say, “Ancestor worship?” I say, “Yeah.” I say, “I get weary, I get weary. But then I remember my ancestors. My father and his brother and his sister lost their mother in the winter of 1906, in St. Louis, Missouri, a segregated town. All of them were very young. My father was a baby less than six months old. Their father was a n’er do well. In 1906 blacks had precious few rights in this country. These children were grandchildren of illiterate slaves and sharecroppers. They were truly children at risk. They could easily have grown up to be street people. But their mother’s sister came and got them and took them to Minnesota where they lived in the home of their uncle by marriage, Samuel Williams. By the world’s standards, Samuel Williams did not have a great position. He was a servant on railroad trains, a dining-car waiter, and was called “nigger,” “boy,” “George,” or any number of other demeaning names. He cleaned

spittoons and did the other menial tasks required of a railroad servant. But he had a job.

Uncle Sam had a job. He went to that job every time he was required to be there. And that job organized that family. There was discipline. There was hope. There was a connection with the economy. The job gave Aunt Elizabeth the ground to stand on that she needed in order to teach those children values. And those children went to the public schools in St. Paul, Minnesota, and then went to the public university, the University of Minnesota. The girl became a very, very popular student in the twenties, before she died while still a student. My father you have heard of—the journalist who read Shakespeare. And the oldest child, Roy, became the head of the NAACP and was given the Medal of Freedom by President Johnson. That all happened because Uncle Sam had a job. Uncle Sam’s job and Aunt Elizabeth’s love came together and formed the bridge for the Wilkins family to cross over from illiterate slavery and sharecropping into middle class American life.

People need work and dignity in order to feel useful, to forge ahead, and to develop their dreams. And it is the aggregation of those individual and family dreams that make it possible for us to have dreams for our cities. We are not tending to those dreams now, but I don’t take it as a given that we can’t come back to the work and dignity aspirations of ordinary Americans.

And so it seems to me that the best I can do for my sixties dream, and for Jim Laue’s sixties dream, is to fight as hard as I can for a movement that seeks to preserve and enhance the work opportunities for ordinary working Americans and their dignity in this maelstrom created by a global economy. It is the only way we are going to save our civilization. It is the only way we are going to save our cities. It is the only way we are going to revive the hope and the promise and the dreams that make life worth living.

Thank you for inviting me tonight.

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