

40TH ANNIVERSARY (1997 SPEECH)

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The following is Governor Huckabee's speech from the 40th Anniversary of the Central High School Integration Crisis back in 1997.

Thank you very much, mayor, Mr. President, Mrs. Clinton.

We welcome the world to Arkansas today because 40 years ago the world watched as a most unfortunate event happened on this very campus. Forty years ago there was a lot of tension that filled the air in Little Rock, Ark., and on the campus of Central High School. And today we come back exactly 40 years later and we recognize that there is still some tension.

There were those who perhaps hoped this event wouldn't take place because it only might open up old wounds. But we come today because it is important to have tension every now and then. After all, it is tension that builds our muscles and gives us strength. And if it is necessary for us to have some tension in order that we can change things, then tension can be a very necessary and positive thing for us.

In the Proverbs it says that "he who conceals his sins does not prosper. But whoever professes and renounces them will find mercy." Today, we come to confront the pain of the past, to celebrate the perseverance of some very courageous people and to continue the path to prosperity.

It is important that we confront the pain of the past because, frankly, there are some times when as we look back on our history we are disturbed, and we ought to be disturbed. The children of Israel wandered for 40 years in the wilderness, and in many ways Arkansas and the rest of the nation has wandered for 40 years in the wilderness as it relates to race relations.

Essentially, it's not just a skin problem, it's a sin problem. Because we in Arkansas have wandered around in ambiguity, all kinds of explanations and justifications. And I think today we come to say once and for all that what happened here 40 years ago was simply wrong. It was evil, and we renounce it.

What the people did who tried to hold those nine from entering the doors of this high school may be forgivable, but it is not excusable. I remember those photos, and they will always haunt me as I look back and see the faces of those teenagers -- the same age as my own children -- and realize those teenagers were simply reflecting the values and the teachings they got at home. And what is really tragic that we today come to renounce is the fact that in many parts of the South it was the white churches that helped not only ignore the problems of racism, but in many cases actually fostered those feelings and sentiments. And today, we call upon every church, every pulpit, every synagogue, every mosque in every part of Arkansas and the rest of the world to say never, never, never, never again will we be silent when people's rights are at stake.

We come today to celebrate the perseverance of some extraordinary people. The nine who have been introduced today had the courage to risk their very lives for an opportunity that the white students in Little Rock took for granted in 1957. And we celebrate them today.

But I'm so glad the mayor made mention of some heroes we often forget, and that's the parents of the Little Rock Nine. As a parent of a high school student here in this school, I will tell you that I often have anxiety about my daughter going to school, or my son, and the reason is very simple: I'm wondering if they are going to get into trouble, make bad grades, and that happens.

But I cannot even begin to imagine the anxiety on the part of the parents of the Little Rock Nine whose greatest fear was not that their son would come home having had an argument with a fellow student or a teacher, not the fear of coming home with an F, but the fear of never coming home because of a mob. That, my friends, is something that I cannot even begin to comprehend. But these brave parents not only had to comprehend it, they had to live with it. And they had to live with the deprivation -- economically and physically -- that they often faced because many of their lives were forever changed by those who haunted them and taunted them through levels of racism that we read about and see the photos of. Photos that we will never forget, and we shouldn't.

We come today also to continue the path to prosperity. I say "the path" because we haven't arrived. And let's be very honest and very clear and very certain about it. We've come a long way in 40 years -- a long way. But we're not home yet. We're a long way from the time when we can say all things are as they should be. But we can also say that all things aren't as they once were, and that should give us hope and that should give us courage and that should give the commitment to continue on today.

I know that when Mayor Dailey and I sat down a little more than a year ago and first talked about what we hoped might be some way to commemorate the events of 40 years ago -- and I use the word commemorate, not celebrate -- we celebrate progress, but we don't celebrate what happened 40 years ago, but we mark it, and hopefully we move from it. But when we sat down, we had a great anxiety and fear that we would end up with little more than simple ceremonies and testimonies of those of us who are politicians coming to congratulate ourselves for all the things that we had done.

And I will tell you today what I believe is in the heart of every person on this platform, and I think I can say with genuine sincerity that none of us here would for one moment claim that we are the ones who have moved this generation in the 40 years so much as it is the courage of individual citizens like these parents, the Little Rock Nine and those who came after them. And for those white students at Little Rock Central who understood it was the right thing to do to welcome those classmates and to accept them and to receive them. And for every one of them who had to put up with the jeers and with the insults, a heartfelt thanks.

We celebrate the progress, but now we must navigate the future. Some have asked: how long are we going to deal with this Central crisis situation? Are we going to have to relive it every few years? And I know there were some who were frankly made to feel very uncomfortable about all of these activities because some felt that it would just resurrect feelings and anxieties. Well, let me tell you how long we will deal with it -- until justice is the same for every human being whether he or she is black or white, we will deal with it. Until the same rules apply to get a bank

loan for every person regardless of who he or she is, we will deal with it. As long as there are whites who turn around and see a black person coming and bring fear to their hearts, we will deal with it. And as long as there are blacks who look and see and have resentment toward a white person, we will deal with it. We will deal with it until the dream of Dr. Martin Luther King lives in all of our hearts, and that is that we will judge people by the character of their hearts and not by the color of their skin.

Let me remind us: Government can do some things, but only God can change people's hearts. Government can put us in the same classrooms, but government can't make classmates go home and be friends when school is out. Government can make sure that the doors of every public building are open to everyone. Government can ensure that we share schools and streets and lunch counters and buses and elevators and theaters. But let us never forget that only God can give us the power to love each other and respect each other and share life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness with every American, regardless of who he or she is.

Today, as we dedicate the Little Rock Central Visitor Center, I will tell you that last Friday my daughter and I went there. We walked through that exhibit and it brought memories to me of the time when Sarah was 11 and we went through Yad Vashem in Jerusalem to visit that incredible place that is dedicated to the memory of the victims of the Holocaust -- another one of our history's horrors. And as we went through Yad Vashem, she saw the pictures of the horrible treatment and of the extraordinary injustices of the evil that was marked by that time. I never will forget when we came to the end of that exhibit and there at the guest book, she stood and took my pen and started writing her name and address. And underneath there was a space for comments.

As long as I live I will remember as my daughter paused and then wrote words that will forever be in my mind. She wrote simple words. I wondered as we went through it, did she understand the message of it, did she get it? If there was any doubt, it was erased as I looked at those words. Because those words simply said, "Why didn't somebody do something? Why didn't somebody do something?"

In silence, we left and I knew she got it. Today, as the world once again revisits Little Rock and the great state of Arkansas and its great people, I hope that never, ever, ever does someone have to ask why didn't someone do something. As for those who go through that visitor center and may ask why didn't someone do something, I hope they will take a good, long look and realize that today we celebrate nine people who did do something.

God bless you, and God bless America.