

**CENTER *for* PUBLIC POLICY PRIORITIES**

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Good afternoon. Over the last forty-five years, it has been my privilege to make several speeches here in Austin, Texas. The first was in 1972, when President Lyndon Johnson invited me to keynote his Civil Rights Symposium. In 1981, I had the honor of delivering the commencement address at the University of Texas School of Law, followed by an invitation from Lady Bird Johnson to speak at the LBJ Library, once more.

While each of these occasions was surely important, my most memorable speech in Austin was on October 21, 2005, when I spoke at the dedication ceremony of the Heman Marion Sweatt Courthouse in Travis County.

For those of you who do not know, Heman Sweatt was a native Texan and the plaintiff in the famous case of *Sweatt v. Painter*. That case went from the then-segregated Travis County Courthouse all the way to the Supreme Court, and desegregated the law school at the University of Texas. Thurgood Marshall was lead counsel.

I was pleased to honor Heman Marion Sweatt, a true Texas hero. And now I am pleased to be back in Austin to honor yet another Texas hero—the former mayor of Houston and my Lazard partner, Bill White.

Before I talk about Bill, I want to thank the Center for Public Policy Priorities for the invitation to speak here today and also visit with old friends. Being here with all of you is just as important to me as the dedication of that courthouse twelve years ago—because while years have passed, and times have changed, we come together in the same spirit of progress—for the people of Texas, and the people of the United States. The very progress that the Center for Public Policy Priorities fights for day in and day out.

Of course, we might ask ourselves: how do we sustain and protect that progress? And one of the answers to that question must be leadership. In fact, when I was invited to speak here, I was asked to talk about “the importance of pragmatic, inclusive leadership.” And I can think of few better models of that kind of leadership than Bill White.

The term “pragmatic leadership” suggests a kind of calm. A serenity in the face of hyperbole. A literal port in a storm. And Bill White knows something about storms!

And throughout his career, Bill has demonstrated how this kind of leadership can be inclusive and compassionate.

Yet it seems pragmatism and compassion are two concepts you don’t often hear together.

Today, the pragmatism is frequently confused with expediency – cutting deals, sacrificing ambitious plans, getting things done in a hurry, regardless of the consequences.

But in its best uses, this outlook seeks facts, solutions, and results. In his series of lectures on the subject, the great American philosopher William James said this mindset, and I quote, “unstiffens all our theories, limbers them up and sets each one to work.”

We know, in the United States today, there is much work to be done—on health care and education and economic opportunity, all areas on which the Center for Public Policy Priorities so valiantly leads. And

we must find a way to do this work even as our discourse pushes, and often rewards, ideological spats. In recent months, we have seen many storms—both in the atmosphere and in the political sphere—and on the national level, it has been hard to know the way forward.

Instead of pragmatism, many of our leaders seem to be embracing rigid ideology as their guiding principle. On some level, this might help score political points. Little more than a month ago, the Pew Research Center reported that “highly ideological members of congress have more Facebook followers than moderates do.”<sup>i</sup> More recently, Roy Moore's Senate primary win in Alabama is another indication about how extreme ideology is being rewarded.

The problem is that, more often than not, ideology is not tied to reality. As my friend, president Bill Clinton—a former keynote speaker at this event—has said, and I quote: “this is a practical country. We have ideals. We have philosophies. But the problem with any ideology is that it gives the answer before you look at the evidence.”<sup>ii</sup>

In Washington, this evidence-based approach has long been positioned as the alternative to blind partisanship. It might even be our antidote to decisions made based on “fake news” and “alternative facts.” Because we know that, in order to improve people’s lives, we have to know what works.

Today, however, being “practical” often takes the form of believing our government should be run like a business, or that business experience alone makes you fit to serve.

This idea is not new. In 1938, New York mayor Fiorello LaGuardia claimed that he intended to “run this city as any honest man attempts to run his business and to live within [his] revenue.”<sup>iii</sup> And there are plenty of other examples.

But as this position has gained more traction over the last few decades, the idea of “running government like a business” has taken on the flavor and fervor of ideology, rather than the measured tone of pragmatism.

Many of those who believe government should be run like a business flatten the idea to imply efficiency rather than effectiveness, and in doing so seek to simply reduce government rather than improve it. Look no further than the latest healthcare debate, the simple act of trying to pass a bill before getting it scored by the CBO, and you’ll see an instance of the phenomenon Bill Clinton described. This approach means giving an answer before even seeing the evidence.

Fortunately, Bill White knows better. As a business executive turned mayor, he’s a model for anyone who seeks to bring private sector thinking to public service, because he understands both the value of this perspective, and its limits.

Indeed, ten years ago, when Bill was honored as one of the public officials of the year, it was written that Bill White, and I quote, is “not one to say government should be run like a business. He's seen too many companies fail to believe that old saw.”<sup>iv</sup>

Bill knows what we all know—that government cannot afford to fail. After all, there is no Chapter 11 when you don’t have creditors, but constituents... when they don’t want your assets, but your assistance.

Government cannot afford to be driven by financial results alone. Because the goal of government is not to maximize profits, but to constantly increase the well-being of citizens. Governments don't build widgets or sell products—they serve people. The balance sheet does not override the aspirations of America's founding principles or the responsibilities to our people.

And that is the problem with pragmatism. It lacks a moral dimension.

That moral dimension was key to the founding of this organization—I can see it all the way back to the Benedictine Sisters of Boerne.

And this moral dimension—and specifically compassion for the people we serve—is essential to great leadership.

Great leaders must recognize what people fear, and what people need. In business, that means listening to your customers. In government, that means acting in accordance with the will—and the needs—of the people.

As Bill White himself has said: "it doesn't matter if you're in the public sector or private sector [...] if you listen to the customer, you'll be able to run a good organization."<sup>v</sup>

So, when the cry went out in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, when people fled the city in droves and travelled to Houston, Bill White welcomed them with open arms.

He did not accept hundreds of thousands of people because it was practical. He did it because it was moral. His rationale was simple: “you should treat your neighbors the way you’d want to be treated.”<sup>vi</sup> At the time, Bill had no idea what he was in for. He did not know, years before, when he gave his inaugural speech as Houston mayor, just how much he would need to “embrace strangers.”

Bill did not know when he opened the city to two hundred thousand people, that twelve years later, he would find himself in water up to his chest, forced to leave his own home.

And if you have seen the picture that I'm describing, you've seen Bill White's spirit.

Because what Bill knew, and what I know, is that if you treat people well—not like objects or subjects, without generalization or exaggeration—you will see that returned.

It's why, without hesitation or a home to go to, Bill got on his phone, and started doing what he could to coordinate the response.

And it's why all of us should take this moment to celebrate his leadership, and demand it of others.

Because for Texas, and for America, Hurricane Harvey was a reminder that we are all in this together. That, there, but for the grace of God go I.

It does not matter who you are—rich or poor, Black or White, man or woman, straight or gay, citizen or immigrant. And it is not limited to hurricane season. In so many ways, the flood will come for all of us.

It may come in the form of a diagnosis, that fills your days with worry, and bills pushed under your door like the water of these floods.

Or it may come in the form of a bad break—a job lost or business closed, all in the name of cutting costs without consideration of the human cost.

It may come with the rumbling of the earth or roaring of the sky. It may be violence that sends people off in search of a safer, better life—be that throughout Latin America, or the Middle East, or right here in Texas.

As a country, our ability to weather the storms we face has everything to do with how we treated others when the floods came for them.

As I mentioned earlier, I know that many years ago, this organization was founded by Benedictine nuns.

And while the flooding in Houston was just shy of biblical proportions, I can not help quoting the Bible.

Some of you may recall the story from scripture of the sheep and the goats, when the king turns to the people on his right, and says: “I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”<sup>vii</sup>

And then the people say: we did not see you hungry, we did not see you thirsty. We did not see you naked or sick or in prison.

And the king replies: “whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”<sup>viii</sup>

It’s the same passage Bill White often referenced back in 2005, as he welcomed Katrina victims to Houston. And it still applies today—whether we think about the millions of our sisters and brothers in prison, or afraid for their health care, who are searching for food or looking for work.

What have we done for them? What can we do for each other, and our society?

Ultimately, we must judge our leaders and ourselves on our capacity for compassion.

We must remember that not only are we in the same boat, but that when our sister or brother is up to their waist in floodwater, we must lend a hand.

And we must all find ways to lead with compassion, for we do not know when we will need that compassion ourselves.

This all would be true in the best of times, but, in many ways, we are living in the worst of times.

Look beyond the borders of this state, and consider the state of the world. Massive storms have battered not only Texas, but Florida and Puerto Rico. Tensions rise with North Korea, while our allies wonder whether they can rely on the United States. Meanwhile ongoing crises—like climate change, or

refugee crises across the world—barely make it above the fold.

We've awakened to read with horror stories of terrorist attacks in Europe, White supremacists in Charlottesville, and mass murder in Las Vegas. From terrible news, there seems to be no respite, reprieve, or relief.

And all this is made worse by the utter lack of leadership.

This is not a partisan statement. Neither party seems to know what it's doing. And it should be a reminder to all of us that the compassionate, practical, necessary leadership—and solutions—will not come from the top down. Those things will come from places like this, from organizations like this, and from leaders like Bill—from people working on the ground to make their communities better.

I am so glad to be here today to honor a man who has done that, and an organization that has done that for so long, and I hope that others will learn from your example.

Thank you all.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/08/21/highly-ideological-members-of-congress-have-more-facebook-followers-than-moderates-do/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2012/9/21/1134679/-President-Bill-Clinton-The-problem-with-any-ideology>

<sup>iii</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2017/03/27/trumps-idea-to-run-the-government-like-a-business-is-an-old-one-in-american-politics/?utm\\_term=.1c0a05913d61](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2017/03/27/trumps-idea-to-run-the-government-like-a-business-is-an-old-one-in-american-politics/?utm_term=.1c0a05913d61)

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.governing.com/poy/Bill-White.html>

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.governing.com/poy/Bill-White.html>

<sup>vi</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/08/30/during-katrina-he-welcomed-flood-victims-into-his-city-now-the-former-mayor-of-houston-has-become-one/?utm\\_term=.0037f6c846ee](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/08/30/during-katrina-he-welcomed-flood-victims-into-his-city-now-the-former-mayor-of-houston-has-become-one/?utm_term=.0037f6c846ee)

<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+25:31-46>

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