



Welcome and Introduction of Richard Lapchick

Transcript of plenary session in Washington, DC, on December 8, 1997

JUDITH RODIN

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JUDITH RODIN: (Joined in progress) ...culture and public behavior, leadership in a democratic society and the 21st-century community. Each group is focused on one of these fundamental social problems. Each group is charged with analyzing it and offering for consideration by the whole commission ideas that may help us all to think and act differently about the important issues and important choices that we face every day.

Today and tomorrow we will continue with this essential task. With the help of our keynote speakers, we will focus on ways in which some institutions in our society—professional sports, colleges and universities, government, military service—can exert a more positive influence on public behavior, and on the tenor of public discourse and culture. With the framework of our two previous meetings in place and the recommendations of this week's keynote presenters before us, we will be able to turn tomorrow afternoon to the task of deliberating together as an entire commission. We will for the first time take up the specific recommendations made by our presenters and those who preceded them in the first two sets of meetings, and try to come to some consensus regarding them and their broader applicability to society.

With the results of these deliberations in hand, we can look forward to our work over the next year. This winter and spring, for the first time, we will begin the important task that we defined for ourselves of reaching out to a wider group of present and emerging leaders, as well as to many of the institutions and professions that they represent, and indeed, reaching more broadly to the general public. Not only do we want to share with them the preliminary ideas and conclusions coming out of our deliberations, but we must engage them in the dialogue to create a network of activities surrounding the commission's activities.

In Chicago next June, we hope to engage some of these leaders and their professional communities directly, to engage them about the tasks and possibilities of leadership in a democratic society. Then in Los Angeles a year from now, our focus will be on ways to reinterpret and reconceive the concept of community for a 21st-century America, an America that will certainly be, as Richard Rodriguez told us last June, vastly different from the one in which most of us were raised.

Running through our discussions of public behavior, leadership and community will be of central concern for the character of the public conversation that binds us together. Many institutions in our society play a powerful role in shaping that conversation, and today's session and tomorrow's will allow us to examine several of them. One of them, of course, although sometimes overlooked, is the modern business corporation, and as many of you know, one of our originally scheduled speakers for this meeting was the late CEO of Coca-Cola, Roberto Goizueta.

Roberto was one of those rare corporate leaders who truly understood the capacity of leaders to change institutional cultures. His personal characteristics—warmth, openness and unfailing civility; his willingness to accept responsibility for monumental blunders as well as for enviable successes—these deeply influenced the corporate culture at Coca-Cola, an international network of 69,000 employees and 2.2 billion customers.

In a commencement address last spring at Loyola University in Chicago, Roberto spoke of the erosion of our society's civic infrastructure, something

that concerned him deeply. More important, he recognized that businesses, like other institutions, have a real stake in the issues that we've convened to consider. To those with doubts, he pointed out that it was a reputation for poor customer relations and terrible service that spawned the competition that toppled the telephone industry; certainly, the telephone monopoly. The same thing is now happening in the cable television industry.

Roberto saw clearly, and I quote, "Managing a business requires maximizing the value of the company's assets, and a corporate culture of incivility and intolerance thwarts the development of a company's most important asset: its people." He saw, too, that, much as in academe, where our international disciplinary communities may be our most important sources of self-definition and companionship and communication, so too was it in the business world.

He wrote, "Today, for many of us, our company is the institution that most defines our sense of community. We may know the colleague we work with side by side or one we e-mail in Europe better than we know the neighbor down the street. The internal civility and robust discourse of the modern multinational corporation can contribute as much to the formation of a tolerant and vibrant community for its employees and for our society as the freewheeling exchanges on our campuses and our disciplinary communities," end quote.

And creating such robust conversation is in no way incompatible with the success in the competitive world of business. Certainly, under Roberto Goizueta's leadership, Coca-Cola was transformed — transformed from a slow-footed, bureaucratic, quite conservative company into one of the greatest generators of shareholder wealth in international corporate history.

Corporations are but one of the major institutions that have this kind of power, the power to shape public culture and public behavior. Certainly no one can doubt that professional sports, with its amalgam of mass-market appeal and profit motives and the competitive ethos of athletes and the spectators alike is another. From the poor role modeling of Roberto Alomar and Dennis Rodman, to the long fights for integration on the playing field

and in the front offices, to the cradle-robbing parents of the child tennis pro, professional sports certainly does present powerful models of behavior, often of negative behavior, for all aspects of our society.

And yet we should not forget that for every Dennis Rodman, there's also an Arthur Ashe. For every Roberto Alomar there's also a Tiger Woods. And for every Marge Schott there's also a baseball commissioner like Bart Giamatti.

Professional sports offers us a difficult and demanding focus for our first discussion of the responsibilities of institutions for influencing the patterns of public behavior and the tenor of public discourse. To lead us in this consideration, we are truly fortunate to have with us today a member of the commission who is widely recognized as the nation's leading authority on sports and society.

Richard Lapchick has spent much of the past three decades working to understand and enhance the social role of professional sports. As a graduate student he was the first recipient of the Ford Foundation's Martin Luther King Fellowship for research on international race relations; wrote his dissertation on the politics of race and international sport in South Africa. In the years since, he has been repeatedly recognized for his leadership on the issue of apartheid-era South Africa's participation in international sports competitions.

Recipient of the Ralph Bunche International Peace Award, the Anti-Defamation League's World of Difference Award, the Aetna Foundation's Arthur Ashe Voice of Conscience Award, Richard is the founder and director of the Center for the Study of Sport and Society at Northeastern University and president of the National Consortium of Academics and Sports. Author of eight books and more than 250 articles, he brings to us his wide experience in innumerable projects aimed at ending racism in sports, in understanding the relationships between athletics and violence, and grappling with the complex interactions of business, athletic competition and entertainment that characterizes modern professional sports.

I'm delighted that he is with us today to discuss professional sports and public behavior. Richard Lapchick.