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THE Affirmative Action Debate

edited by

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Personal Responsibility

Robert L. Woodson, Sr.

Recent threats to terminate affirmative action policies have been met by a strong counterattack from established black spokespeople and members of the Congressional Black Caucus. Their defense of affirmative action is made easier by the fact that most critiques of these programs have rested on claims that they produce "reverse discrimination" and that they have hurt the teeming masses of angry white men. The public debate about affirmative action, thus, has been polarized along racial lines.

In contrast to the public debate, private opinion regarding race-preferential policies does not split so neatly along the racial divide. A 1995 NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll revealed that 47% of blacks surveyed were opposed to affirmative action policies. The opposition voiced by many blacks at the grassroots level is not due to a concern about the effects that the policies have had on whites but the impact they have had on low-income blacks.

WHO ARE THE DISADVANTAGED?

Not all blacks are equally "disadvantaged." My own children, like the children of the black writers who contributed to this anthology, may have better prospects for a successful future than many white kids. The premise that underlies current affirmative action policies is the assumption that race is, in

itself, a disadvantage. It should come as no surprise that when preferential treatment is offered without regard to economic circumstances, those who have the most training and resources will be the best equipped to take advantage of any opportunities that are offered.

The University of California at Berkeley, for example, practiced affirmative action in its admissions policies until Governor Pete Wilson forced a vote on this issue in 1995. The university routinely applied significantly lower admissions standards for black and Hispanic students than for white or Asian students. Who benefited from this practice? The minority students admitted through this policy weren't necessarily economically disadvantaged youths from poor inner-city schools. Research reveals that many affirmative action students came from middle- and upper-income families. Many attended integrated schools in the suburbs. In fact, in 1989, 17% of Hispanic freshmen and 14% of the black incoming freshmen at Berkeley came from households with incomes above \$75,000.¹

In the job market as well, the prime beneficiaries of race-preferential policies have been middle- and upper-income blacks, not those who are most in need. Since the inception of affirmative action programs, the gap between different economic tiers within the black community has steadily widened. From 1970 to 1986, black households with incomes above \$50,000 increased by 200% as middle-income blacks moved into the upper income bracket. Yet during the same period the number of black families with incomes below \$10,000 continued to increase.² If racial discrimination is the only factor deterring black progress, why haven't all blacks benefited equally from programs to remedy discrimination? Priority should be given to efforts to design strategies that will promote the economic progress of those who are most in need.

The federal government, with its strict allegiance to race-based goals in hiring, has contributed to the growth spurt of middle-income blacks. A recent report from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission revealed that the federal government employs 254,846 blacks in white-collar jobs.³ In

1994, an article in the *Washington Post* entitled "Washington Is the Capital of Black Prosperity" observed: "New York's African-American population is double the size of Washington's, but Washington has almost as many black families making at least \$100,000. Yet, if a person were to walk the streets of Washington, the sight of men and women huddled in doorways and on sidewalk grates is a grim reminder that this affluence is not enjoyed by all. The poverty rate within the predominantly black population of Washington, D.C., was 29% greater than that of national population."⁴

Although the purpose of affirmative action programs was to give more blacks access to the job market, statistics indicate that the major effects of such race-preferential policies has been a redistribution of black workers from small and medium-size firms to large companies and federal jobs. Black unemployment rates have remained twice those of whites.⁵

Not only have affirmative action policies failed in their intended purpose, but they have often provided opportunities for flagrant abuse. In many cases, race-based set-asides that were justified by the condition of the poor have multiplied the fortunes of blacks with six-figure incomes and, in addition, have provided millions of dollars in tax breaks to white corporations.

A prime arena for this sort of opportunism lies within the communications industry. In an effort to create greater black representation in the broadcasting industries, the Federal Communications Commission offered massive tax breaks for the owners of television and radio stations who sell to minority purchasers. In numerous instances, blacks have served as "fronts" for white companies in exchange for a portion of the profits that accrued from these sales. A number of wealthy blacks have taken advantage of affirmative action programs to purchase radio and television stations, only to "flip" them back to white buyers for windfall profits. In fact, the Federal Communications Commission has reported to Congress that of 192 radio stations transferred to minority ownership under Section 1071 since 1978, the overwhelming majority were resold within a period averaging four years.

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One such transaction that came into public view in 1995 was the proposed tax break of up to \$640 million that was to have been given to billionaire Sumner Redstone for his sale of Viacom, the world's second largest media and entertainment conglomerate, to a consortium led by black investor Frank Washington. The purchaser in this case was deemed "minority controlled," although Washington provided only 20% of the purchasing price and would be able to withdraw after three years with a \$2 million profit. Such deals are not foreign to Mr. Washington. He helped draft the policy as an FCC lawyer in 1978 and has since profited from a number of other cable sales — one by the Hearst Corporation and three by Jack Kent Cooke, the owner of the Washington Redskins.⁶

Opportunism in the guise of "affirmative action" has spread across racial and political boundaries. Those who have cashed in on this game include the black former mayor of Charlotte, North Carolina, Harvey Gantt, as well as white executives such as President Reagan's labor secretary, Ray Donovan. When charges were brought against Donovan alleging that he had set up a "front" of minority ownership for a company he owned, they were dropped by a judge who cited the "prevalence of the practice."

Meanwhile, those who are most in need have received scant benefit from the policies instituted in their name. Consider, for example, the 8(a) program of the Small Business Administration, which allows federal agencies to contract some jobs out to minority-owned firms without competitive bidding. Although beneficiaries of 8(a) contracts defend the program as a key to economic opportunity in minority communities, a study by the General Accounting Office disclosed that 1% of the 5,155 firms participating in the 8(a) program received one-fourth of the \$4.4 billion awarded in contracts in fiscal 1994.⁷

Unwittingly, Arthur Fletcher, a staunch advocate of affirmative action policies, tipped his hand and revealed that many beneficiaries of affirmative action programs are far from disadvantaged. He described the audience of a meeting he convened in the state of Washington to defend the programs.

There were people fighting to get on the bus to go to the meeting, including brothers who thought they had made it and sisters in mink coats who suddenly realized that the coat, the house, the kid in college, and the Lexus were in danger.

In spite of the failure of affirmative action to improve the condition of those who are most in need, black spokespersons have continually waved the red flag of racism whenever anyone objects to the way the system is working. Representatives Charles Rangel and Major Owens of New York went so far as to liken critics of the Viacom deal to Adolf Hitler.⁸

SPAWNING A VICTIM MENTALITY

The myopic focus on race-preferential policies has had more devastating consequences than the opportunism it has spawned. These policies are based on the assumption that race is, in itself, a "disadvantage," and that this disadvantage justifies demands for compensation from the larger white society. In essence, an underlying premise of race-preferential policies is that the destiny of the black community lies in what others do—or fail to do. This premise undermines the tradition of self-determination and personal responsibility that had long provided a foundation for the stability of the black community.

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A virtual culture of victimization has been engendered as many of those in leadership positions have entered into a Faustian deal, trading a long-standing tradition of self-sufficiency for a bevy of race-based entitlements. Young people are being told by their elders that they need not be expected

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either to earn their rewards or to accept responsibility for their wrongdoings. What message are they receiving from their purported role models? A number of prominent black figures have excused their blatant personal indiscretions — ranging from sexual harassment to embezzlement — with the claim that any charges brought against them are simply evidence that they are being targeted because of their race.

A victim mentality has been not only demeaning but dangerous for the young people who have taken this message to heart. In effect, they have been told, You are a victim of society. If you commit rape or rob and kill a brother, you are not really to blame, for you have been wronged. Case in point: In December 1993, a black gunman killed five persons and wounded eighteen others on a crowded New York commuter train. A note found in his pocket expressed his "strong hostility" for Caucasians, "rich black attorneys, and Uncle Tom Negroes." In a front-page article in the *Washington Times* entitled "Many Blacks Blame Shooting on Social Struggles," William Tatum, publisher and editor in chief of New York City's largest black newspaper, the *Amsterdam News*, was quoted as saying, "We don't find this kind of behavior unexpected: the white press has done so much to polarize our city. . . . Who knows what [the gunman] has seen, what terror has been visited upon him?" In Washington, D.C., a black talk show host made an attempt to explain the brutal murders: "The more we find ourselves at the edge of dollar survival, the more frustration that exists."⁹

Many young blacks have followed this exemption from personal responsibility. As the moral foundation of a once strong community has crumbled, rampant violent crime and senseless homicides have decimated an entire generation. Today, a black male born in Harlem has a shorter life expectancy than a baby born in the poverty and famine of Bangladesh.

So what should we do?

A RICH LEGACY OF SELF-HELP

To find models of effective ways of dealing with past discrimination, we need look no further than our own black ancestors, who dealt with vicious oppression. They understood that their most powerful response lay not in demands made of whites, but in their own industriousness, mutual effort, and faith-inspired perseverance.

At the end of the Civil War, hundreds of former slaves overcame the effects of an era of oppression and legislation that barred them from even learning to read to score impressive gains in terms of both economic and educational progress. During the first half-century of freedom, blacks increased their overall per capita income by 300%.¹⁰ With confidence in what they had to offer, many blacks parlayed the demand for labor and their growing power as consumers to their advantage, in spite of the injustices they endured. Their attitude was voiced by the president of the Nashville Negro Business League, the Reverend Richard Henry Boyd, who proclaimed that "these discriminations . . . stimulate and encourage, rather than cower and humiliate, the true, ambitious, self-determined Negro."¹¹

Groups such as the American Missionary Association established hundreds of schools serving tens of thousands of black students. From 1865 to 1892, black illiteracy declined from 80% to 45%; the number of black newspapers increased from 2 to 154, attorneys from 2 to 250, and physicians from 3 to 749.¹² Decades later, in the 1920s and 1930s, still under the oppression of Jim Crow laws and legislated segregation, blacks in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Durham, North Carolina, established thriving business districts, which were known as Deep Greenwood and Hayti. By 1945, these bustling districts of commerce offered virtually every service and facility the black population could want or need, including theaters, tailor's and seamstress's shops, laundromats and dry cleaners, repair shops, clothing stores, grocery stores, inns, hotels and restaurants, appliance and furniture stores, funeral homes, and libraries. In

addition, the districts were the site of numerous offices of black doctors, lawyers, and dentists.¹³

Tragically, this rich legacy of self-help and entrepreneurship has been ignored by many black spokesmen whose careers rest on the deficiencies, rather than the capacities, of blacks. When I appeared with Jesse Jackson on a Black Entertainment Television town hall meeting on affirmative action in 1995, I cited the remarkable post-Civil War achievements of former slaves and asked Jackson flatly, "Are you suggesting that the destiny and history of black America has been determined by what white America has allowed us to do?" Jackson shot back, "Abso-DAMN-lutely!" His reply exposed the mindset that underlies the demands of the current civil rights establishment. This kind of thinking denigrates our rich history and places the destiny of the black community in the hands of others.

In athletics, in spite of past discrimination blacks have excelled, not because standards were lowered but because barriers were eliminated. Blacks dominate in sports where they have set their standards high and practiced diligently in pursuit of excellence. When this same formula is applied to academic performance, black youths have proved that they are equal to the task in this arena as well.

A perfect example is the Challenge program at Georgia Tech in Atlanta. The program was originally conceived as a remedial program for disadvantaged incoming freshmen. Based on a "deficit" model, it sent the message that there was something wrong with the minority students that had to be fixed. Initial studies showed that the youths who were enrolled in the program did no better academically than their counterparts who were not.

An astute assistant to the college president pointed out that the lack of results did not indicate a problem with the students but a problem with the *program*. Under his guidance, the program was recast not as a remedial course but as something akin to the preseason training of athletes. It was touted as a program designed to hone the skills of the best and brightest through five weeks of intensive math and chemistry studies. In

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its first year, this new version of the program produced significant results. Ten percent of Georgia Tech's minority students (as compared to 5% of its white students) finished with 4.0 grade point average. In this one year, more blacks achieved a perfect grade point average than in the entire preceding decade. Retention rates for minority students in the engineering school approached 100%. Today, in response to requests that were made by white freshmen, the course is being offered to all students.

This is not to deny that, in some cases, preparation is needed if some students who have suffered social and economic disadvantages are to compete successfully, but it is to stress that the preparation should be given with a goal of high standards of performance. Expectations—high or low—can become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Rather than demanding concessions and special exemptions from standards, we should return to a focus on practice, performance, and personal responsibility. "Affirmative action" should no longer be equated with demands for special treatment. Instead, it should refer to strategies that are employed to equip our young people to meet and exceed the highest standards of performance.

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