Affirmative Action and the American Creed

Despite the great civil-rights triumphs of the 1960s, the politics of race once again occupies center stage in American life. Yet what appears to be a conflict between blacks and whites, Seymour Martin Lipset argues, is more a struggle between the American public and the nation's political elite over the true meaning of equality.

by Seymour Martin Lipset

No achievement of 20th-century American politics surpasses the creation of an enduring national consensus on civil rights. This consensus was forged during the past quarter century by a civil-rights movement that compelled Americans finally to confront the wide gap between their treatment of blacks and the egalitarian values of their own cherished national creed.

In recent years, however, the leaders of the civil-rights movement have shifted the focus from the pursuit of equal opportunity to the pursuit of substantive equality through policies of preferential treatment. This has brought matters to a difficult pass, because most Americans, including many blacks, have not shifted with the leaders of the movement. The reason is not hard to find. While the civil-rights movement of the 1960s asked Americans to live up to a single unassailable ideal, today it sets up a conflict between two core American values: egalitarianism and individualism.

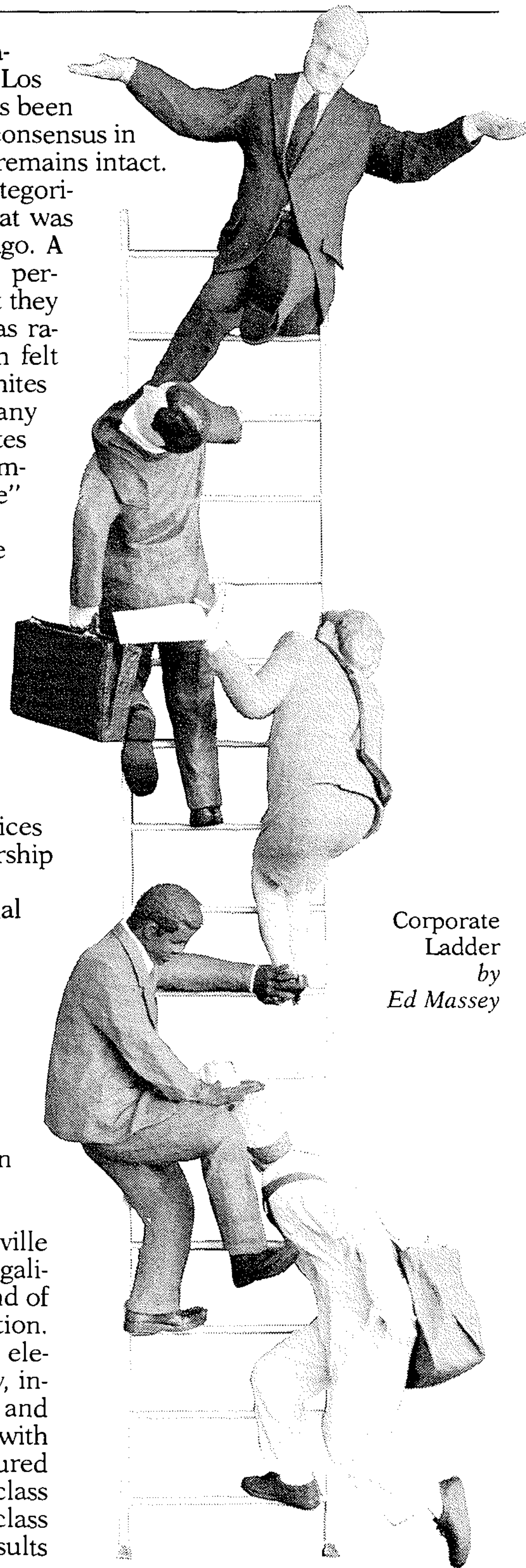
Affirmative action was born in 1965 in the spirit of the first civil-rights revolution. Soon thereafter it was transformed into a system of racial preferences, and today affirmative action is rapidly polarizing the politics of race in America. The editorial and op-ed pages bristle with affirmative action polemics and analyses. In the 1990 contest for the governorship of California, Republican Pete Wilson focused on the "quota" issue in defeating Diane Feinstein. In the same year, Senator Jesse Helms won reelection in North Carolina with the help of the quota issue, and in Louisiana ex-Klansman David Duke exploited it to gain a majority of white votes while losing his bid for a Senate seat. His failed campaign for the governorship last fall became a national drama. When Congress began its 1991 session, the first bill introduced by the Democratic leadership in the House of Representatives was a civil-rights bill described by its opponents as "quota" legislation. Even after a version of that bill became law in November, controversy over its meaning and import continued.

Ugly political campaigns and even uglier racial incidents everywhere from Bensonhurst to Los Angeles sometimes make it appear that there has been a resurgence of racism in America. But the old consensus in favor of civil rights and equality of opportunity remains intact. Americans, including many southern whites, categorically reject the kind of racial discrimination that was common in this country only a few decades ago. A 1991 Gallup–*Newsweek* poll reported that "72 percent of blacks and 52 percent of whites said that they would prefer to live in a neighborhood that was racially 'half and half'—more on both sides than felt that way three years ago." Over two-thirds of whites and four-fifths of blacks claim to "know many members of another race well." Almost no whites (six percent) report that they would feel "uncomfortable working with members of another race" or "for a boss of another race."

At the same time, most Americans endorse some forms of compensatory action to help blacks and other disadvantaged groups perform at the levels of competition set by the larger society: Head Start and other special educational programs, federal aid for college students, job training, and community development. But a large majority of whites and roughly half of all blacks draw the line at preferential treatment, at suspending standards and adopting quotas or other devices that favor citizens on the basis of their membership in groups.

If most Americans oppose such preferential treatment, who backs it? As it turns out, the support comes largely from a segment of the national leadership class. Indeed, the policy was conceived and is still promoted almost entirely by political and social elites, Republicans as well as Democrats, against the wishes of a majority of the American public. The struggle over preferential treatment is in reality less a conflict between whites and blacks than between people and their leaders.

More than 150 years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville observed that the American version of egalitarianism emphasized equality of opportunity and of respect, rather than equality of result or condition. This version of equality is one of five related elements in the American Creed, including liberty, individualism, populism (the rule of the people), and laissez faire. In the Europe of Tocqueville's day, with its heritage of feudalism, societies were structured in strict social classes. The emerging working class of 19th-century Europe therefore viewed the class system as immutable and sought equality of results



Corporate Ladder *by Ed Massey*

as a group, through socialism. But in America—or at least in *white* America—the purest bourgeois and classically liberal society in the world, class has been treated as an economic construct, and the solution to inequality has been seen as economic opportunity.

During the late 1820s, when the first stirrings of socialism were barely being felt in Europe, Workingmen's parties emerged in New York, Philadelphia, and other American cities. But the Workingmen were not socialists; they believed in private property and wanted people to strive to get ahead. The New York party rejected as inadequate the idea of common (i.e. public) schools then favored by many egalitarian reformers, proposing instead the creation of state-financed boarding schools. The only way to create the proverbial level playing field, the Workingmen reasoned, was by raising the young of all classes in a common atmosphere 24 hours a day.

The American emphasis on individualism was reinforced early on by the country's religious commitment to the "nonconformist" Protestant sects that stress voluntarism with respect to the state and a personal relationship to God, one not mediated by hierarchically organized churches, as in Europe and elsewhere. The American embrace of liberalism and the market also favored a different approach to equality. The market calls for meritocracy and the rejection of nepotism and other forms of favoritism. Hiring the best qualified person, whether he or she be black or white, Jewish or Gentile, native or foreign born, is the best way to maximize economic return.

The implications of the differences between Europe and America were concisely put by political scientist Walter Dean Burnham: "No feudalism, no socialism: With these four words one can summarize the basic sociocultural realities that underlie American electoral politics in the industrial era."

But another reality, too, is undeniable: Blacks represent the terrible exception to the common American experience. They spent their first two-and-a-half centuries in this country as slaves and another 100 years after the Civil War serving as a strictly segregated lower-caste group—social arrangements that were, in both cases, much more explicitly hierarchical and hereditary than anything in European feudalism. White America's treatment of blacks focused on group characteristics, on defining and treating people not according to their personal merits but according to their ancestry, their race, and their ethnic identification.

Stressing group characteristics encourages group solutions. In Europe, the importance of one's station promoted class consciousness among the lower strata and, to some extent, a sense of *noblesse oblige* among the privileged. Both the lower-class–based social democratic Left and upper-class conservative leaders, such as Disraeli in Great Britain and Bismarck in Germany, favored government efforts to improve the lot of the less affluent without necessarily changing their position in the social order: welfare, public housing, public employment, state medical care. Europe's social democrats have frequently held power since the 1930s, and they have done much to improve the lives of workers. But in most countries they have neither dismantled the elite high schools nor significantly expanded opportunities for working-class youths to gain a university education.

Americans, by contrast, have always put more emphasis on expanding individual opportunity through education. From early in the 19th century the United States has led the world in the proportion of its population completing elementary and high-school educations. Horace Mann and other education reformers of the 1830s and '40s who proselytized for the concept of the common school insisted that the schools should be open to all, rich and poor, children of immigrants and of natives—though not blacks. Such reformers rejected the European class-differentiated education system, scorning the German *gymnasia*, the

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French *lycées*, and the English "public" schools, which educated at most only the top 10 percent of the population.

The transatlantic differences today are most striking in higher education. As of 1987, 65 percent of all Americans 20–24 years old had been exposed to some form of postsecondary education. No West European country was close. Only 31 percent of the French and 30 percent of West Germans, for example, had any experience in a college, university, or other educational institution after high school.

The United States spends proportionately much more public money on education than does any European nation, while Europe spends more on welfare. In 1985, American educational outlays amounted to 6.7 percent of gross domestic product (GDP). The average figure for 17 West European countries was 5.1 percent. As of 1981 about one-fifth of the American GDP was devoted to social expenditures (including education), as compared with over one-quarter in the 24 industrialized countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

It would be hard to overstate the continuing importance of the American cultural emphasis on achievement. Most Americans believe that hard work, rather than "lucky breaks or help from other people," is what enables people to move up. Surveys by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) from 1983 through 1990 found that around two-thirds of respondents consistently agreed that "people get ahead by hard work." Eighty-eight percent said "ambition" is essential or very important "for getting ahead in life." The vast majority of Americans, including most blacks, believe that the United States is still a land of opportunity, a meritocracy in practice as well as in theory. Asked in 1988 whether they have a good chance of improving their standard of living, 71 percent of Americans told NORC that they did. By contrast, 43 percent of Italians, 36 percent of Germans and Britons, and only 23 percent of the Dutch thought so. And although Americans are already much more likely to go to college than are people in any other country, close to two-thirds (65 percent) believe that opportunities for higher education ought to be increased still further. By comparison, only 55 percent of Britons and 31 percent of Germans feel this way.

Most white Americans now believe that the nation's success ethic applies to blacks and women as well. And while understandably ambivalent about the promise of America, most blacks are also committed to the belief that hard work and educational attainment will enable them to get ahead. A Gallup poll conducted in 1991 found that "69 percent of whites and 68 percent of blacks say that African-Americans should focus most of their energy on improving [their] education."

The black condition has challenged the nation's values from the very beginning. "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just," Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1781. If the country broke up over the question of slavery, a friend of George Washington's reported in 1791, Washington "had made up his mind to move and be of the northern." Jefferson foresaw that the promise in his ringing phrase, "all men are created equal," would have a continuing effect on American politics and would ultimately undermine slavery.

In 1944, following the logic of Jefferson's observation, Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal noted in *An American Dilemma* that white Americans, including most southerners, deeply believed in the Creed, even as they grossly violated it with "Jim Crow" and other segregationist practices. The Creed was so strong, he concluded, that if blacks were to organize to defend their rights, whites would have to yield. The political successes of the civil-rights movement in the 1960s showed Myrdal to be right. But in yielding politically, the white male political elite agreed not only to the extension of individual rights to blacks but to unprecedented group rights.

Affirmative action has had two incarnations in America, and in its first, during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, it reflected a more or less traditional American approach to the problem of inequality. Perhaps the best statement of the logic of this variety of affirmative action was offered by President Lyndon Johnson in a speech at Howard University in 1965:

> You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, "you are free to compete with all the others," and still justly believe that you have been completely fair.... Men and women of all races are born with the same range of abilities. But ability is not just the product of birth. Ability is stretched or stunted by the family that you live with, and the neighborhood you live in—by the school you go to and the poverty or the richness of your surroundings. It is the product of a hundred unseen forces playing upon the little infant, the child, and finally the man.

LBJ's solution was the War on Poverty, which included heavier spending on education through such programs as Head Start, expansion of Aid to Families with Dependent Children, and a host of other initiatives. These efforts were reinforced by legislation designed to eliminate discrimination in the workplace, housing, the schools, and eventually in such areas as club memberships, which affected social relationships. The extension of full political citizenship to blacks through the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and later legislation and judicial decisions meant that blacks, like whites, could press for their legal rights as individuals in the courts and administrative tribunals.

Affirmative action underwent a major transformation—one whose consequences we are grappling with today—when national leaders became convinced that the first approach was working too slowly. Ironically, the change was made by the conservative Nixon administration. It was not a reaction to specific demands made by blacks or the American Left but seemed to represent an innovative effort by parts of the white elite to fulfill the goals of the civil-rights movement.

In October 1969, Nixon's secretary of labor, George Schultz, issued an administrative order imposing a quota for the hiring of black apprentices on federal contractors in the Philadelphia construction industry, whose employers and unions were cooperating to deny jobs to blacks. The policy was soon extended to other cities and ultimately to other fields. Looking back, Laurence Silberman, who as Schultz's solicitor had written the brief justifying the Philadelphia Plan under the Fifth Amendment's due-process clause, recalled that he and his colleagues were disturbed by the ambiguity surrounding the Johnson administration's affirmative-action order. And because they were "uncomfortable with the image the party of Abraham Lincoln had developed," Silberman, later a Reagan judicial appointee, wrote, "and most of all because the GOP was anxious to expand employment opportunities for blacks, we launched what I have come to see as a fundamentally unsound policy."

The new affirmative action was strongly opposed by Comptroller General of the United States Elmer Staats (a Johnson appointee), the national trade union leadership, and most congressional Democrats. Clarence Mitchell of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People denounced it as a "calculated attempt coming right from the President's desk to break up the coalition between Negroes and labor unions. Most of the social progress in this country has resulted from this alliance." Speaking for the administration, George Schultz criticized civil-rights leaders for not backing the quota plan.

Opponents objected that the anti-discrimination clause of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, Title VII, explicitly outlawed "affirmative discrimination." Staats quoted Senator Hubert Humphrey's pledge that nothing in the Act "will give any power to the [Equal Employment Opportunity] Commission or to any court to require hiring, firing, or promotion of employees in order to meet a racial 'quota' or to achieve a racial balance," and the agreement by its liberal Senate floor managers that there would be no "consideration of color... [in] the decision to hire or promote." In December 1969, however, Congress rejected a rider to an appropriations bill that would have explicitly banned quotas. Republicans voted against the ban, 124 to 41, while Democrats voted for it, 115 to 84. "The Democrats are token oriented—we are job oriented," Nixon said. The parties were soon to reverse roles.

Nixon and his successors, Republicans and Democrats alike, gradually extended "communal rights" to other minorities, as well as to women. Yet such gestures were hardly appreciated by the American public.

Opinion polls have repeatedly shown that overwhelming majorities of whites—both men and women—and often more than 50 percent of blacks oppose them.

Many American elites seem to feel that the individualistic emphasis of the American Creed needs to be amended. Of the many arguments for preferences during the 1960s, the most notable was made by a black scholar, Harold Cruse, in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967). Given the oppression of the past and continuing discrimination in the present, he argued, blacks require recognition as a unique national minority. They also merit group rights over and beyond those sought by other minorities and the non-black poor. Cruse compared the black situation to that of the Jews, arguing that although Jews had faced great discrimination, all they needed to prosper was an end to discrimination and the application of meritocratic policies to themselves. Having won that, Jewish organizations made a fetish of the American Creed, insisting that all minorities and immigrants needed only similar treatment. Black leaders came to argue that they could rightfully claim group rights, in part as reparations for 350 years of unparalleled exploitation by white society. After all, they now say, Congress has compensated Japanese-Americans for their incarceration during World War II and the West German government paid reparations to Jews and Israel.

Furthermore, long before affirmative action, Americans deviated from the meritocratic principle in the treatment of war veterans. As compensation for their service, veterans received preference in the civil-service hiring process as well as special assistance in financing higher education and home mortgages.

In many ways, of course, the United States has never been a perfect meritocracy. In the job market and other fields, people tend to favor relatives, friends, and members of their own ethnic, religious, communal, or cultural groups. And universities, though meritocratic and universalistic in their explicit values, have always favored the children of alumni and faculty, not to mention athletes, in their admissions policies. They also award special scholarships and fellowships limited to applicants from particular regional, gender, ethnic, or religious backgrounds—though some of these practices are now outlawed. To a large extent, blacks have been excluded from these networks of privilege.

Women and most other minorities have required only genuine equality of opportunity, not special help, in order to make a place for themselves in American society. Indeed, the Jews, the "Confucian" Asians, and the East Indians have done better on average than old-stock white Americans with similar skills and education. Roughly 40 percent of Mexican-Americans hold white-collar or other high-level positions today, even though most of them were not born in the United States. In any case, immigrants generally have no claim on American society. Whatever handicaps they have—inadequate education, lack of skills, inexperience with the ways of the cities—are not the fault of American society.

Blacks clearly do have a claim on this society. As I wrote in 1963 in *The First New Nation*: "Perhaps the most important fact to recognize about the current situation of the American Negro is that *equality is not enough to assure his movement into the larger society*." The question is, what will?

One of the more novel proposals is advanced by Brandeis University's Lawrence Fuchs in *The American Kaleidoscope* (1990). He argues for a system of preferential treatment in employment that varies according to the type of job. Fuchs points out that in many, if not most, occupations employers chiefly require competence, not superior performance. Seniority rights, legislation outlawing compulsory retirement ages, and tenure for school teachers are all justified by the assumption that general competence is a sufficient qualification for employment. Thus, Fuchs contends, efforts to increase the number of minority workers among the less-skilled—"fire fighters, machinists, computer operators, and candidates for dental school"—can reasonably include numerical goals, permitting "race to be counted as one of many factors . . . ." in filling jobs. But he argues that fields in which high achievement matters a great deal—scholarship, medicine, sports, airline pilots, and management—should not be subject to quotas and special preference

policies, apart from special recruitment and training efforts.

Whatever the merits of Fuchs's distinction, people who work in these less-exalted fields do not accept such disparaging estimates of their worth. Poll after poll finds that white workers see no reason that meritocratic standards and universalistic rules should not apply to them. In fact, more support (or at least acceptance) of special preferences is found among elite whites, who begin with much more economic and status security.

Mass opinion remains invariably opposed to preferential treatment for deprived groups. The Gallup Organization repeated the same question five times between 1977 and 1989:

> Some people say that to make up for past discrimination, women and minorities should be given preferential treatment in getting jobs and places in college. Others say that ability, as determined by test scores, should be the main consideration. Which point of view comes close to how you feel on the subject?

In each survey, 10 or 11 percent said that minorities should be given preferential treatment, while 81, 83, or 84 percent replied that ability should be the determining factor. When the 1989 answers were broken down by the respondents' race, blacks were only somewhat more supportive of preferential treatment than whites (14 percent to 7 percent); a majority of the blacks (56 percent) favored "ability, as determined in test scores." Women, it should be noted, had the same response as men; 10 percent supported preferential treatment, and 85 percent ability.

Gallup, working for the Times Mirror Corporation, presented the issue somewhat differently in 1987 and 1990: "We should make every effort to improve the position of blacks and other minorities even if it means giving them preferential treatment." This formulation was supported more strongly. Twenty-four percent agreed in both years, while 71 to 72 percent disagreed. Blacks were more favorable than whites by 32 to 18 percent, but again it is notable that over two-thirds of the blacks rejected preferential treatment. And while over four-fifths of the Republicans surveyed were against preferences, so were two-thirds of the Democrats. A relatively high proportion of those who identified themselves as "strong liberals," 43 percent, endorse preferential treatment, but they constituted only 10 percent of the total sample.

Last spring, a *Newsweek*–Gallup poll posed the issue in terms of persons of equal qualifications: "Do you believe that because of past discrimination against black people, qualified blacks should receive preference over equally qualified whites in such matters as getting into college or getting jobs?" Only 19 percent of whites responded positively, 72 percent said no. But preference secured a plurality of 48 percent among blacks, with 42 percent opposed.

Preferential treatment does somewhat better when it is justified as making up for specific past discrimination, when ability is not posed as an alternative, and when it is limited to blacks and applies only to employers that have actually discriminated. The *New York Times* national poll asked in May and December of 1990: "Do you believe that where there has been job discrimination against blacks in the past, preference in hiring or promotion should be given to blacks today?" Both times, roughly one-third of those polled said yes. But small majorities, 51–52 percent, rejected preferential treatment even under these conditions.

By June 1991, during the debate on the new civil-rights bill that Republicans attacked as quota legislation, support for preferences dropped to 24 percent, while opposition rose to 61 percent. One month later, a poll of blacks taken by *USA Today* to test their reaction to Clarence Thomas's nomination to the Supreme Court found that they rejected quotas. They were asked, "Thomas has said that racial hiring quotas and other race-conscious legal measures damage blacks' efforts to advance. He emphasizes self-help instead. Agree or disagree?" More blacks agreed with Thomas, 47 percent, than disagreed, 39 percent, while 14 percent replied "don't know."

Both whites and blacks, however, will support a policy described as "affirmative action" if it explicitly does not involve quotas, as an NBC News–*Wall Street Journal* poll found in July 1990. Two-thirds of whites (66 percent) and 84 percent of

blacks responded favorably to the question: "All in all, do you favor or oppose affirmative action programs in business for blacks, provided there are no rigid quotas?"

Americans make a critical distinction between compensatory action and preferential treatment. To return to Lyndon Johnson's image of the shackled runner, they are willing to do more than remove the chains. They will go along with special training programs and financial assistance, enabling the previously shackled to catch up with those who are ahead because of earlier unfair advantages. But they draw the line at predetermining the results of the competition.

In some measure, the distinction between "compensatory action" and "preferential treatment" parallels the distinction drawn between "equality of opportunity" and "equality of results." Compensatory action is probably seen as a way to enhance equality of opportunity. Because blacks have been discriminated against in the past, it is fair to give them special consideration so that they will have a better chance in the future. Preferential treatment, on the other hand, probably sounds to most whites like an effort to predetermine the outcome of the competitive process.

The heaviest support for preferential treatment seems to come from the liberal intelligentsia, the well-educated, the five to six percent of the population who have gone to graduate school, plus those who have majored in the liberal arts in college.* Support is also strong among the political elite, particularly Democrats but including many Republicans (though not many prominent officeholders). The Democrats in Congress increasingly support these policies, a change which may flow from the fact that the proportion of Democratic members who can be classified as liberal on the basis of their voting record has increased steadily since the 1960s.

Democratic leaders are increasingly out of step with public opinion, and it is hurting them. The Republicans, their creation of quotas long forgotten, now vigorously emphasize meritocratic standards. Democrats are faced with a dilemma: how to respond to pressure from civil-rights groups and the intelligentsia on the one hand, and on the other, how to prevent the party's identification with quotas from alienating its traditional base of support among whites in the working class and the South. Lyndon Johnson anticipated the problem in 1965, when he said in private White House discussions about civil rights, "We have to press for them as a matter of right, but we also have to recognize that by doing so we will destroy the Democratic Party."

This is precisely what is happening. A *New York Times*–CBS News poll conducted in mid-year 1991 found that 56 percent of Americans said the Democratic Party "cares more about the needs and problems of blacks," while only 15 percent believed the Republicans do. More significant may be the finding that, when asked the same question about "the needs and problems of whites," 45 percent answered that the GOP cares more, only 19 percent said the Democrats do, and 14 percent said both parties care equally about both races.

Affirmative action is widely seen as reverse discrimination. Many less-affluent whites believe that the number of jobs available for them has declined as a result of preferences for blacks. Two studies undertaken in 1985 and 1987 by Stanley Greenberg of the Analysis Group for the Michigan Democratic Party indicate that negative reaction to affirmative action has played a major role in the defection of white male blue-collar voters from the party. "Much to the surprise and dismay of both Greenberg and his sponsors," one writer noted, "white fury over affirmative action emerged as a top voter concern in both of his reports. Democratic campaign themes such as 'fairness,' 'equity,' and 'justice' were perceived—not without justification—as code words for quotas."

National polls indicate the same concern. Two surveys, one conducted by the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research in 1986 and the other by NORC

*Universities themselves continue to press for numerical goals or special preferences, reflecting the greater strength of liberalism in academe than in other realms of American life. And not surprisingly, the most extensive application of numerical targets in higher education can be found in the humanities and "soft" social sciences, the most left-leaning disciplines.

in 1990, found large majorities of whites replying that it is "very likely" (28 percent in both) or "somewhat likely" (48 and 42 percent) "that a white person won't get a job or promotion while an equally or less qualified black person gets one instead." Two-fifths of the whites in the 1986 study believed that they or someone in their family would experience job discrimination. A 1991 report on a poll sponsored by the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights concludes that "civil-rights laws are seen by a substantial number of voters as creating unfair advantages, setting up rank or class privilege in the labor market."

"White Americans . . . do not see themselves as racists, or as opponents of equal opportunity and fundamental fairness," observes columnist William Raspberry. "What they oppose are efforts to provide preferential benefits for minorities. . . . How could we expect them to buy a product we [blacks] have spent 400 years trying to have recalled: race-based advantages enshrined in law?"

Misperceptions have much to do with the polarization of racial politics. The best research shows, for example, that there is in reality little reverse discrimination in the competition for lower-skill jobs. Recently, Urban Institute researchers sent equally qualified whites and blacks to apply for general labor, service, retail, and clerical positions in Chicago and Washington, D.C. Whites were treated better in job interviews in 20 percent of the cases; blacks were treated better seven percent of the time. Whites were more likely to be hired. One finding is heartening: There was no discrimination in three-quarters of the interview situations. But blacks are still more likely to suffer from racism in working-class job markets than whites are to experience reverse discrimination.

If whites overestimate the extent of reverse discrimination, whites and blacks alike badly underestimate the extent of black economic progress during the past several decades. The general ignorance of black success is due in part to the reluctance of black leaders to admit it. In opinion polls during the mid-1980s, three-fifths of the black leaders told pollsters that blacks were "going backward," while two-thirds of a national black sample said they were "making progress." (Support for the optimistic view declined somewhat in the latter years of the Reagan era. In early July 1990, an NBC News–*Wall Street Journal* poll reported that 60 percent of all blacks said that, compared to 10 years ago, blacks in America are "better off," while 29 percent said "worse off.")

The refusal of some black leaders to admit improvement is understandable. The worse things appear, and the greater the gulf seems between themselves and others, the more they can demand. Yet the repeated emphasis on how little progress has been made also helps sustain the argument that government efforts to benefit blacks simply do not work, that there are factors inherent in the black situation that prevent blacks from getting ahead. And many blacks as well as whites tend to swallow that argument. NORC found that during 1985–89, an average of 62 percent of whites and 36 percent of blacks agreed that the reason blacks on average have worse jobs, incomes, and housing than white people is that "most blacks just don't have the motivation or will power to pull themselves out of poverty." An ABC News–*Washington Post* poll in October 1989 found that 60 percent of both whites and blacks agreed with the statement: "If blacks would try harder, they could be just as well off as whites."

Such beliefs feed racist stereotypes and black self-hatred. In early January 1991, NORC released the results of a survey taken in 1990. They indicate that most whites believe that blacks are less intelligent, lazier, more violence-prone, and more inclined to prefer to stay on welfare than whites and several other ethnic groups.

The damage is compounded by the news media's relentless focus on the social pathologies of the ghettos, which creates the impression that most blacks live wretched existences. Yet social scientists estimate that the underclass, both black and white, is actually fairly small. William Julius Wilson, the social scientist most responsible for focusing attention on the question, now identifies one-sixth of the nation's 30 million blacks as ghetto poor, a term he prefers. (These are people who live in "areas of extreme poverty, that is, those in which 40 percent of the people are poor.") An Urban Institute group arrives at

a lower estimate of the underclass: two or three million people in 1980, about two-thirds of them black, one-fifth Hispanic.

Meanwhile the total proportion of blacks living in poverty—many not afflicted by the pathologies of the underclass—has declined radically. While there is a great deal of debate about the definition of poverty, census data indicate that the percentage of blacks living in poverty declined from 55 percent in 1959 to 33.5 percent in 1970. In 1990, a recession year, it was 31.9 percent.

The "invisible man" of the 1990s, to borrow Ralph Ellison's phrase, is the successful black working- and middle-class suburbanite. Living in stable families outside traditional black areas, the new "invisible man" is removed from the experience of ghetto blacks and largely ignored by whites. The black suburban population grew by 70 percent during the 1970s, fed primarily by an exodus from central cities. During the 1980s the number of black suburbanites swelled from 5.4 million to 8.2 million. Between 1986 and 1990, 73 percent of black population growth occurred in the suburbs.

Economists James P. Smith and Finis R. Welch, analyzing the changes in the situation of blacks since World War II, concluded in 1986 that "the real story of the last forty years has been the emergence of the black middle class," which "as a group . . . outnumbers the black poor."

The majority of blacks have steady jobs and are either middle class or members of what may be called the yeoman regularly employed working class. They are married or in stable long-term relationships. The income of married blacks is 77 percent that of comparable whites, up from below 60 percent two decades ago. The proportion of blacks who are high school dropouts has fallen, from 31 percent in 1970 to 18 percent in 1988, while that of whites (14 percent) has not changed.

These drastic social and economic changes have led to growing differentiation within the black community. By the early 1980s, a 1989 National Academy of Sciences panel found, black men aged 25 to 34 with at least some college earned 80 to 85 percent as much as their white counterparts. At the other extreme, one-quarter of their black peers had not even finished high school and were thus condemned to lives at the margins of society.

The two largest groups in the black class structure, the authors say, are now "a lower class dominated by female-headed families and a middle class largely composed of families headed by a husband and wife." The problem is that most black adults live in stable family and economic situations, but most black *children* do not. They are the offspring of the large number of black women who are single mothers. The proportion of black children born in female-headed households was 23 percent in 1960, 28 percent in 1969, 45 percent in 1980, and is 62 percent today. Living in such a household frequently guarantees being poor. The poverty rate for black single-parent families with children was 56.3 percent in 1988. That for two-parent black families with children was 12.5 percent.

The popular impression is that an explosion of illegitimacy among blacks is to blame for the growing impoverishment of black children. But Christopher Jencks of Northwestern University calculates that if married black women had borne as many babies in 1987 as they did in 1960, the proportion of black babies born out of wedlock would have risen only from 23 percent to 29 percent during those years. The proportion is much higher because married blacks now have fewer children.

Whatever the causes of childhood poverty, affirmative action is no remedy. Preference policies or quotas are not much help to the illegitimate black ghetto youth who grows up in poverty and receives an inferior education. As William Julius Wilson writes, they are more likely to benefit "minority individuals from the most advantaged families . . . [who are] most qualified for preferred positions—such as higher-paying jobs, college admissions, promotions and so forth. Accordingly, if policies of preferential treatment for such positions are conceived not in terms of the actual disadvantages suffered by individuals but rather in terms of race or ethnic group membership, then these policies will further enhance the opportunities of the more advantaged without addressing the problems of the truly disadvantaged."

The conflict between different versions

of equality, between an emphasis on the individual and on the group, will continue here and abroad. Societies long organized along group lines of caste or language—India, Pakistan, and Canada—have deeply entrenched group-quota systems that are unlikely to change much. But the failurc of different varieties of socialism and the growing acceptance of the market as the source of economic growth, not only in Europe but in Latin America and Africa as well, suggests that much of the world will see a new emphasis on competitive meritocracy and individualism.

Civil-rights leaders, liberals, and Democrats are swimming against a strong tide. At home, white opinion and, as we have seen, even much black sentiment are against them. Shelby Steele, a black writer once active in Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition, concludes that "affirmative action has shown itself to be more bad than good and that blacks ... now stand to lose more from it than they gain." He rejects it because it leaps "over the hard business of developing a formerly oppressed people to the point where they can achieve proportionate representation on their own. . . ." He fears that affirmative-action quotas undermine black morale, contributing to "an enlargement of self-doubt" by raising the implication that successful blacks have not earned their positions. More than a century ago, in 1871, the celebrated black abolitionist Frederick Douglass made some of the same points. He ridiculed the idea of racial quotas as "absurd as a matter of practice," noting that it implied blacks "should constitute one-eighth of the poets, statesmen, scholars, authors and philosophers." Douglass emphasized that "natural equality is a very different thing from practical equality; and ... though men may be potentially equal, circumstances may for a time cause the most striking inequalities." On another occasion, in opposing "special efforts" for black freedmen, Douglass argued that they might "serve to keep up the very prejudices, which it is so desirable to banish."

From Thomas Jefferson to Hubert Humphrey, the American Left has stood for making equality of opportunity a reality. By a supreme irony, the man most vigorously reviled by Democrats, Richard Nixon, created a situation that has placed them on the wrong side of the issue.

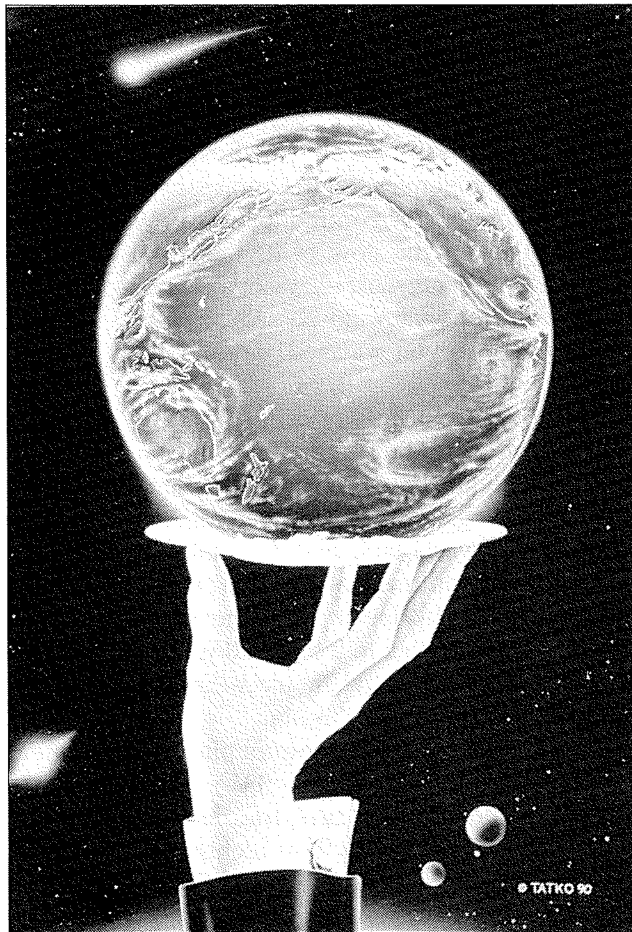
To rebuild the national consensus on civil rights and racial justice, affirmative action should be refocused, not discarded. Quotas and special preferences will not help the poorly educated and unskilled secure good jobs. Success in postindustrial society requires a good education. Extending and vastly improving education in the ghettos, establishing very early Head Start programs as well as financial incentives for students, teachers, and successful schools, and expanding apprentice programs, are the directions to be followed. Such programs should be offered to all less-privileged people, regardless of racial and ethnic origins.

The whole society can also learn from the experience of blacks in the military, which has offered blacks career training and a chance for stable employment and upward mobility. That record argues in favor of a large-scale national-service effort. If all American youth are encouraged to volunteer for national service, those with inadequate education and skills can receive job training while they and their peers help rebuild the nation's infrastructure and deliver social services.

Moving away from policies that emphasize special preferences need not—indeed, must not—mean abandoning the nation's commitment to guaranteeing equal opportunity for disadvantaged citizens. The concept of individual rights remains integral to the American Creed, and racial injustice and caste-like divisions blatantly contradict it. The American dilemma is still with us, and it imposes upon us a moral obligation to ensure that race is neither a handicap nor an advantage. Until black Americans are absorbed fully into our nation's economy and socicty, we should, in Jefferson's words, continue to fear a just God.

Pacific Prospects

With the 50th anniversary of Pearl Harbor only recently behind us, it may seem odd to contemplate the prospects of a coming Pacific Century. In fact, the moment could not be more fitting. After all, current hopes for Pacific cooperation rest largely upon the example of Japan and what it accomplished, with U.S. assistance and the U.S. market, during the years after World War II. Japan's postwar miracle inspired similar takeoffs in other Asian economies, with the result that the Asia-Pacific is fast becoming the most vibrant economic zone in the world. An important question, though, is whether such developments augur the emergence of a Pacific-wide region, bound together by trade, cultural commingling, and mutual security arrangements. Another question is whether the United States should look to the Pacific as its future. Considering these and related questions, our two contributors, Frank B. Gibney and James Clovis Clad, take opposing views. While Gibney sees a Basin brimming with possibilities, Clad finds something far less than overflowing.



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