
THE PERIODICAL OBSERVER

Reviews of articles from periodicals and specialized journals here and abroad

Affirmative Action: A Symbol under Siege

A Survey of Recent Articles

It was never supposed to be permanent, and after some 30 years the time may have come for government "affirmative action" to cease. Senator Joseph Lieberman (D.-Conn.), upon assuming the chairmanship of the moderate Democratic Leadership Council earlier this year, expressed the now-widespread view: racial and gender preferences are "patently unfair."

California is taking the lead in the dismantlement. Governor Pete Wilson recently ordered scores of state affirmative action programs curtailed or eliminated, and a proposition to prohibit the state from discriminating in its employment, contracting, and school admissions is expected to be on the ballot next year. In Washington, President Bill Clinton, prodded by Republican victories at the polls, has ordered a review of federal affirmative action programs.

To Don Wycliff, editorial page editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, affirmative action "looks like a goner." Although he says that "not happily, but resignedly," he writes in *Commonweal* (May 19, 1995), he has long been somewhat troubled by affirmative action. "It really can foster doubt about the legitimacy of the achievements of those it's meant to benefit—not just in the minds of white males, but also in the minds of the blacks, women, or other beneficiaries."

Shelby Steele, author of *The Content of Our Character* (1990), has been making that same point for years. Writing on the *New York Times* op-ed page (Mar. 1, 1995), he contends that affirmative action "has always been what might be called iconographic public policy—policy that ostensibly exists to solve a social problem but actually functions as an icon for the self-image people hope to gain by supporting the policy." White supporters feel virtuous, blacks empowered. The uncomfortable reality, Steele says, "can be seen in two remarkable facts: middle-class white women have benefited from

it far more than any other group, and 46 percent of all black children live in poverty."

Affirmative action has increased the presence of minorities in the professions and at some corporations, universities, and public agencies, observes Princeton University sociologist Paul Starr in the journal he coedits, the *American Prospect* (Winter 1992). But this "genuine positive benefit . . . has not come without cost." It has fueled white racism, and even its beneficiaries have been hurt by that.

For blacks, the loss of affirmative action "will be more symbolic than substantive," Wycliff says. "To be sure, affirmative action has wrought some genuine successes—I count my own education and career among them. But overall, in terms of bringing black people to parity with whites, it has not overwhelmed."

In the view of Roger Wilkins, a professor of history at George Mason University, however, affirmative action "has done wonderful things for the United States by enlarging opportunity and developing and utilizing a far broader array of the skills available in the American popu-

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lation than in the past. It has not outlived its usefulness."

Some aspects do need to be reconsidered and even, in certain cases, abandoned, Wilkins concedes in the *Nation* (Mar. 27, 1995). "It is not a quota program, and those cases where rigid numbers are used (except under a court or administrative order after a specific finding of discrimination) are a bastardization of an otherwise highly beneficial set of public policies."

But it may be too late for such tinkering. When, beginning in the 1970s, the concept of affirmative action was expanded beyond blacks to cover women and various ethnic groups, support for it was bound to be undermined, Don Wycliff says, because that expansion diluted "the sense that this was an obligation to justice. Remember, affirmative action (at least as originally conceived) was about compensation—reparation?—for disadvantages stemming from massive, unique, and undisputed historical wrongs. In this society, those criteria qualify two groups: African-Americans and Native Americans. Any others are a stretch."

The way to rescue affirmative action now, suggests author Richard Kahlenberg in the *New Republic* (Apr. 3, 1995), is "to base preferences, in education, entry-level employment, and public contracting, on class, not race." Others, however, beginning with that magazine's legal affairs editor, Jeffrey Rosen, have been quick to criticize the idea. Class-based affirmative action would be "perverse," Rosen asserts in the *New Republic* (May 8, 1995). He cites a College Board survey: in 1992, the average combined SAT score for black students whose parents earned more than \$70,000 a year was 854 (out of a possible 1,600), 25 points *lower* than the average SAT for white students whose parents earned less than \$20,000. "This statistic," Rosen says, "fatally undermines the premise that disadvantage is a useful proxy for race; and it suggests that need-based preferences, honestly applied, would replace middle-class black students with lower-class white students."

Nathan Glazer, the noted Harvard University sociologist and author of *Affirmative Discrimination* (1975), agrees. Writing in the *Wall Street Journal* (Apr. 5, 1995), he calls class-based affirmative

action "a bad idea, whose weaknesses become apparent" when one looks at how it would operate in government contracting (already "afflicted by dissembling and fraud"), employment, and college admissions. For example, notes Glazer, there already is "a huge and expensive system of federal loans and grants, supplemented by state programs and individual institutional scholarships," to enable the impoverished to go to college. For blacks, making tuition payments is not the biggest challenge. "The problem African-Americans face in entering institutions of higher education is performance, and performance is affected by poverty," Glazer says. Improving performance requires efforts targeted at blacks. Class-based affirmative action, he says, would amount to turning away from the problem.

If President Clinton wants to salvage something from affirmative action, Rosen suggests, "he will have to eliminate most of the mandatory racial preferences that the federal government now administers." But that would enable him to make "a crucial distinction." Federally mandated affirmative action "puts the U.S. government in the business of classifying its citizens by race and gender," and is more offensive to the ideal of equal citizenship than private affirmative action, taken voluntarily by employers.

For all the flaws of affirmative action, "at its heart is a reality that cannot be wished away," says Glazer, a long-time critic. "This is the distinctive condition of American blacks, scarred by a history of oppression no other group, save American Indians, can match."

Affirmative action may be little more than a symbol for blacks, but it *is* a symbol. While it "has done precious little to ameliorate" the problems it was intended to address, Glazer fears "that African-Americans will see the abandonment of affirmative action for them as a terrible rejection by an indifferent and hostile society." At the very least, he concludes, *voluntary* affirmative action—which colleges and universities, major corporations, and many cities could be counted on to maintain, even in the absence of federal regulations—should be encouraged.