

The Quotas Nobody Hates

"Geography: The Invisible Preference" by Alan Grob, in *Reconstruction* (Vol. 2, No. 3, 1994), 1563 Mass. Ave., Cambridge, Mass. 02138; "Old 'Quota' Under Attack" by Ben Gose, in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (June 29, 1994), 1255 23rd St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20037.

Critics of affirmative action seldom object to another departure from the meritocratic ideal: geographic preferences in college admissions and scholarships. Yet these quotas have nothing like affirmative action's "morally compelling" justification, argues Grob, a professor of English at Rice University. Indeed, given Americans' mobility and the reduction in regional and state differences, he believes that geographic favoritism no longer makes much sense.

The practice is widespread, however, notes *Chronicle* assistant editor Gose. Top private universities, which like to boast of

attracting students from all over the country, ease admission standards for applicants from poorly represented states, while some prestigious private institutions, such as Duke University, and some leading public ones, such as the University of Virginia, favor in-state applicants. Virginia and other institutions also give preference to applicants from rural areas.

Geographic quotas also play a significant role in the competition sponsored by the National Merit Scholarship Corporation. It uses scores on the Preliminary Scholastic Assessment Test to select students for semifinalist standing, a prerequisite for scholarships. To make sure that students from all 50 states get scholarships, the corporation automatically names 0.5 percent of each state's graduating seniors National Merit semifinalists. Hence, Grob says, students from states where fewer youths score high, such as Mississippi and South Carolina, have an edge.

Students who benefit from "largely invis-

Kids and Computers

Computers can be useful in education, David Gelernter, a computer scientist at Yale University, says in the *New Republic* (Sept. 19 & 26, 1994), but they should be used "only during recess or relaxation periods. Treat them as fillips, not as surrogate teachers."

Computers should be in the schools. They have the potential to accomplish great things. With the right software, they could help make science tangible or teach neglected topics like art and music. They could help students form a concrete idea of society by displaying on-screen a version of the city in which they live—a picture that tracks real life moment by moment.

In practice, however, computers make our worst educational nightmares come true. While we bemoan the decline of literacy, computers discount words in favor of pictures and pictures in favor of video. While we fret about the decreasing cogency of public debate, computers dismiss linear argument and promote fast, shallow romps across the information landscape.

While we worry about basic skills, we allow into the classroom software that will do a student's arithmetic or correct his spelling.

Take multimedia. The idea of multimedia is to combine text, sound and pictures in a single package that you browse on screen. You don't just read Shakespeare; you watch actors performing, listen to songs, view Elizabethan buildings. What's wrong with that? By offering children candy-coated books, multimedia is guaranteed to sour them on unsweetened reading. It makes the printed page look even more boring than it used to look. Sure, books will be available in the classroom, too—but they'll have all the appeal of a dusty piano to a teen who has a Walkman handy.

ible" geographic quotas are rarely, if ever, stigmatized for taking the place of academically superior students, Grob points out. Black or other minority students who benefit from affirmative action should not be stigmatized, either, he says.

Black Crime, Black Victims

"The Question of Black Crime" by John J. DiIulio, Jr., with commentaries by Glenn C. Loury *et al.*, in *The Public Interest* (Fall 1994), 1112 16th St. N.W., Ste. 530, Washington, D.C. 20036; "The State, Criminal Law, and Racial Discrimination: A Comment" by Randall Kennedy, in *Harvard Law Review* (April 1994), Gannett House, Cambridge, Mass. 02138.

Believing that America's criminal justice system is stacked against African-Americans at every turn, many black and white-liberal critics seek, in the name of civil rights, to constrain law-enforcement authorities in various ways. This stance works against the best interests of most black Americans, contend DiIulio, director of the Brookings Institution's Center for Public Management, and Kennedy, a Harvard law professor.

"America does not have a crime problem; inner-city America does," DiIulio asserts. Despite the widespread anxiety about crime, only seven percent of Americans polled in 1991 regarded crime as a major problem in their own neighborhoods, up just two percentage points since 1985. But among black Americans living in central cities, the percentage soared during the same period from 10 percent to almost 25 percent.

In the nation's 75 most

populous urban counties, blacks constituted 20 percent of the general population but 54 percent of all murder victims (and 62 percent of all defendants). In Washington, D.C., about three-fourths of all homicides between 1985 and 1988 involved young black males slaying other young black males.

Today's liberal reformers, Kennedy contends, do not recognize that the main problem is no longer "white, racist officials of the state, but private, violent criminals (typically black) who attack those most vulnerable to them without regard to racial identity." About 84 percent of the violent crimes committed by a lone black person, and nearly 90 percent of those committed by two or more blacks, are crimes against blacks. Black communities are not receiving "the equal *protection* of the laws," Kennedy insists, often because of a racist devaluation of black victims of crime but also partly because of misguided opposition to law enforcement.

DiIulio advocates a get-tough agenda: more police in inner city neighborhoods, and longer sentences for violent and repeat criminals. He also urges consideration of a more radical measure: taking inner city children out of "dysfunctional or crime-infested environments" and putting them in group



Civil rights pioneer Rosa Parks was added to the list of black crime victims in 1994 when a young black man assaulted and robbed her in her Detroit home.