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# One Nation, Indivisible

WARD CONNERLY

ON JULY 20, 1995, the Regents of the University of California (UC) eliminated the consideration of race, gender, color, ethnicity, and national origin in the admissions, contracting, and employment activities of the University. Thus, UC became the first public institution in America to confront its system of preferential policies. With that action, the Regents began a new era of civil rights reform, a new way of looking at race in America, and, yet, a return to a well-established American ideal.

Coming on the heels of the UC Regents' action was the overwhelming (54 percent to 46 percent) passage of the California Civil Rights Initiative (Proposition 209) by the voters of California. Proposition 209, approved on November 5, 1996, provided that "the state shall not discriminate against, or grant preferential treatment to, any individual or group, on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity or national origin, in the operation of public employment, public education or public contracting."

On November 3, 1998, the electorate of the state of Washington, in an election that can only be described as remarkable, approved Initiative 200 (I-200), a clone of California's Proposition 209. I-200 was approved by a

margin of 58 percent to 42 percent. What made the victory remarkable and, indeed, revealing about the matter of race in America was the number of obstacles that had to be overcome to achieve the result.

I-200 was opposed by the popular Democratic governor of Washington, the Washington Democratic Party, the largest employers in Washington—Boeing, Microsoft, U.S. Bank, Weyerhaeuser, Eddie Bauer Company—and those who lay claim to being civil rights champions, the Urban League, the NAACP, Jesse Jackson, Maxine Waters, and others. The initiative was also opposed by virtually every newspaper in Washington, particularly the *Seattle Times*, whose publisher donated full-page ads worth over \$200,000 to defeat the measure. Vice President Al Gore made four trips to Washington to raise funds and speak out against I-200.

At this election, the voters reelected freshman Democrat Patty Murray to the U.S. Senate, ousted two-term Republican congressman Rick White, stripped control of both houses of the Washington state legislature from Republicans, defeated a measure that would have banned partial-birth abortions, and approved a measure dramatically increasing the minimum wage.

In the face of these events, I-200 received the nod from 80 percent of Republicans, 62 percent of independents, 41 percent of Democrats, 54 percent of labor, and the majority of women, in spite of a campaign barrage aimed at convincing women that the initiative would adversely affect their best interests.

The exit polls tell the story: the people of Washington had decided that the time had come to end race-based preferences. Less than 15 percent of the electorate believed that it was still appropriate to compensate black people for past wrongs. The overwhelming majority of the electorate concluded that all residents of the state should be treated equally: no discrimination and no preferences.

Why did the voters of Washington ignore the advice of politically correct big corporations, politicians, the media, and race advocates, who hid behind the moral fig leaf of “diversity” and “inclusion,” and end the

system of preferences and de facto quotas that have come to define affirmative action? The answer is simple. There is a deeply rooted culture of equality in America that transcends political correctness, partisanship, and ideology. We can trace this culture back to the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.”

This culture of equality was underscored by Abraham Lincoln: “Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” When Martin Luther King Jr. led the nation through the tumultuous civil rights era, beginning with the public bus boycott in Montgomery in 1955, he invoked that culture of equality in calling on America to “live out the true meaning of your creed.”

The principle of equality has been embraced by liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans alike. President Lyndon Johnson said:

Rarely are we met with a challenge, not to our growth or abundance, or our welfare or security, but rather to the values and the purpose and the meaning of our beloved nation. The issue of equal rights . . . is such an issue. And should we defeat every enemy, and should we double our wealth, and conquer the stars, and still be unequal to this issue, then we will have failed as a people and as a nation.”<sup>21</sup>

And Ronald Reagan, in one of his last addresses to the American people, said: “We are all equal in the eyes of God. But, in America, that is not enough, we have to be equal in the eyes of each other.”<sup>22</sup>

The debate about affirmative action preferences is fundamentally about the rights and responsibilities of American citizenship. It is about whether we will have a system of government and a social system in which we see each other as equals. Although often lost in the rhetorical clamor about its benefits, race-based affirmative action as a concept is, at its core, a challenge to the relationship between individuals and their government. It is a direct threat to the culture of equality that defines the character of the nation.

Those who support affirmative action programs contend that such

programs are necessary to provide equal opportunity for women and minorities. The argument is routinely advanced that without affirmative action women and minorities will be subject to the vagaries of the “good old boys network” and will be denied the opportunity of full participation in American life. But when you strip away all the rhetoric about “leveling the playing field” and “building diversity,” preferential policies reduce themselves to two essential questions.

First, are white males entitled to the same assertion of civil rights and equal treatment under the law as women and minorities? Second, how much longer is the nation going to maintain policies that presume that American-born black people are mentally inferior and incapable of competing head-to-head with other people, except in athletics and entertainment? We cannot resolve the issue of race in America without coming to terms with these two questions. And we certainly cannot reconcile the conflicts about affirmative action preferences without answering these questions. More than anything else, however, the debate about race-based preferences has focused the nation’s attention on the politics of race.

The affirmative action debates in California and Washington should convince us that we cannot settle the matter of race in America without settling the issue of affirmative action. But when we resolve the issue of affirmative action, we will be laying the foundation for the kind of race relations that the nation needs in order to live out the true meaning of its creed: one nation, indivisible.

American society was conceived and has been nurtured through the years as a society of individuals. At the center of our society is the concept that we are all a minority of one. Obviously, policies that herd the American people into groups, or political enclaves, are in direct conflict with the spirit of individualism that characterizes the nation. The phrase “people of color” has come to describe the way in which race and ethnicity are being politicized in America. Implicit in this phrase is the coalescing of minorities into a coalition or political caucus, which, together with white women, constitutes a power base of sufficient magnitude to preserve race- and gender-based preferences and to achieve other political benefits for the coalition.

Every day, in every region and hamlet of America, we are witnessing the deterioration of American individualism and the ascension of political group thinking, of which preferential policies are the most visible manifestation. How does this form of identity politics play out in the broader societal context? We don't have to look far to find evidence of how individuals identify with their group as opposed to reacting to issues as individuals. The O. J. Simpson verdict illustrated the profound difference between black and white groups in their perception of the American criminal justice system. Welfare reform was another example of differences between black and white. According to some polls, over 70 percent of black people initially opposed welfare reform, while a similar percentage of white people favored reform.

The issue of the impeachment of President Clinton is yet another example of group thinking, and a vivid illustration of the difference between the perspectives of blacks and whites. For example, a January 22, 1999, Zogby poll found that nearly 67 percent of blacks thought the President's impeachment and trial should just end. Only 22 percent of whites thought this way. Nearly 30 percent of whites felt the President should be removed from office, and a mere 1 percent of blacks felt the same way. Finally, black people support affirmative action preferences by about the same percentage as white people oppose them (over 65 percent in most public opinion polls).

The result of the 1960s civil rights movement should have been the promise of equal treatment under the law for all Americans. Instead, the result has been a presumption that the very term "civil rights" is synonymous with the rights of black people. In America, we are engaged in an exciting adventure, an adventure that is unrivaled elsewhere in the world. Can we take people from around the globe, who come from different cultures, who have different religious beliefs, who embrace different political ideologies, and who are all colors of the rainbow, and assimilate their differences into a common culture and national identity?

When Thomas Jefferson and the other founders laid out this adventure, they gave their new nation a moral blueprint to make the adventure a

success. The centerpiece of that blueprint is our system of moral principles. Moral principles do not change with the seasons. That is precisely why the founders proclaimed that certain truths are “self-evident” and “endowed by our Creator.” They are not meant to change or to be bargained away. Our inalienable rights are the centerpiece of that moral system, and the principle of equality is central to our system of rights.

But what can the average citizen expect from such a morality-based society? The citizens of America present and future had (and have) a right to know what benefits would obtain from an adherence to fundamental moral principles. The founders did not disappoint. They envisioned a more perfect union with freedom, liberty, justice, and equality for all Americans.

So equality is directly linked to our freedoms and to our system of liberty and justice for all. Giving someone a preference, lower academic requirements, contract set-asides, or employment quotas betrays that system. Preferences based on race and ethnicity diminish the value of the individual in ways too numerous to mention and have consequences far beyond their effects on the nation’s character and the harm that they do to those who are not the beneficiaries of such policies. Preferences unwittingly damage the perceived beneficiaries more than one can ever imagine, in spite of the denials of preference advocates. This occurs in two principal ways.

First, preferential policies, by their nature, require a paradigm of victims and oppressors. In a highly competitive society such as America, there is nothing more debilitating to an individual than to crush the competitive instinct. It is like taking a baby animal from its mother, domesticating it, and then turning it loose in the wilderness. The probability is high that the animal, its natural instincts to survive dulled by the process of domestication, will have a difficult time surviving in the wild. So it is with people, especially black people. Though their ancestors successfully struggled to overcome tremendous obstacles, many young blacks seem to be lacking in the area that matters most in a modern, global economy: a competitive desire and self-confidence in one’s ability to compete in academic pursuits. Too many young, bright black men and women have no confidence in

themselves and in the American system when the subject is education. A similar phenomenon is now occurring among Latinos. Telling them that they need affirmative action becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Following a lecture at Florida State University where I had vigorously opposed preferences based on race and ethnicity, a black woman grabbed my hand and led me to a corner of the room. "I am listening to what you are saying," she said, "and you are making sense. But I have four boys, and I want to do what is best for them. What advice do I give them about race?" I said, "Tell them that they may encounter an element of racism and discrimination along life's journey, but for every act of racism, they will probably experience five acts of fairness and opportunity."

"Tell them to study, study, study to prepare themselves for the opportunities that will present themselves and build their careers around the good things that will happen. If racial obstacles confront them, go under, around, over, or blast through those obstacles. But don't let them believe that their futures are contingent upon anyone else's generosity. Make them believe in themselves and trust our system. The concept of self-reliance is the best and most enduring gift you can give them." She smiled broadly and said, "Thank you."

The major obstacle facing the average black person in America is not race; it is the attitude and approach of black people toward their role in American society. If we have any hope of moving America forward in its attitudes toward race, we must get black people to acknowledge and act upon their role in resolving this issue. This is not to suggest that black people alone can resolve the American race dilemma. Nor is it to suggest that white people have no obligation to come to terms with their role in resolving this dilemma. But too often the race dialogue centers around what "white America" must do and is totally neglectful of the role of black people.

The second effect is equally as consequential: preferences create their own "glass ceiling." I don't know why the defenders of such policies fail to acknowledge or admit the enormous effect that such policies have upon the attitudes of others. Does it ever occur to them that the reason black

people and other “minorities” are not considered for more upper management positions, even in corporations that pound their chests about “celebrating diversity,” is that such corporations still consider “minorities” to be inferior and noncompetitive for higher positions?

Giving people who are classified in a certain group a “leg up” stems from the view that those individuals have limited capacity and cannot succeed without someone else’s generosity. It is easy to be “generous” when hiring someone to be the affirmative action officer or the community relations coordinator. That generosity ends, however, when a more responsible position becomes vacant. The person hired out of a need for diversity or because one wants to provide affirmative action is rarely included when candidates are being considered for chief executive officer. Too often, I have heard selection panels reply, “We have never viewed him (or her) as suitable for that position.” The reason is that affirmative action marginalizes its beneficiaries.

The people of California and Washington have begun to grapple with and resolve issues of race and ethnicity. It is of vital importance that the people in the rest of the nation too begin to resolve these issues. Unless this national reform proceeds apace, a long period of quiet turmoil in America is likely to be the result. Ultimately, the turmoil may no longer be quiet.

Throughout the debate about race preferences, opponents as well as proponents summon the words of Dr. King to help make their case. Obviously, no one knows what position Dr. King would have taken on this issue if he were alive today. There is one statement that he made, however, that should go unchallenged, and it can serve us well in our time: “Sooner or later all the peoples of the world, without regard to the political systems under which they live, will have to discover a way to live together in peace.”<sup>3</sup>

As a nation, America has got itself into one hell of a mess because of affirmative action preferences. Some groups of people believe it is their entitlement, whereas others are seething with anger about such programs. If the words of Dr. King are to come true, we must end the existing system of preferences that differentiate the American people on the basis of race,

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ethnicity, and gender. Only by doing that can we rededicate our nation to the principle of equality and bring social peace and harmony to America.

### Notes

1. President Johnson, Special Message to the U.S. Congress, March 15, 1965, "The American Promise."

2. Ronald Reagan, speech to the Republican National Committee, Republican Party Convention, August 17, 1992.

3. From Dr. King's Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, December 10, 1964 (minus the middle clause).