

Clinton Orders Affirmative Action Review

At Stake: Principles And Political Base

By Ann Devroy
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President Clinton has ordered an "intense, urgent review" of all aspects of the government's affirmative action programs, aimed at protecting those that can be shown to work and jettisoning or altering the rest.

In a closed-door meeting Wednesday with House Democrats, the president warned of what many Democrats already fear: that the GOP will try to use the issue of racial preferences to slice into the multiracial coalition that traditionally has supported Democrats. White males in the last election generally favored the GOP, and Republicans want to keep them with arguments that the GOP is "colorblind" while Democrats give minorities unfair advantages.

An attendee at the Wednesday House session quoted Clinton as saying, "We have to outsmart the Republicans. We have to help those who deserve help and stand behind the best aspects and principles of opportunity. But we should also be prepared to recommend modifications where there are problems. We cannot walk away from this fight."

Clinton over the past week has granted a series of interviews with black reporters in which he has made a broad case for continuing government programs that give preference to minorities in cases

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where discrimination has been proven and the action redresses the effects of that discrimination.

George Stephanopoulos, senior Clinton adviser, directs the group overseeing the White House review of government affirmative action programs and upcoming court cases on the issue. Democrats in the White House and elsewhere are also concerned about the implications of a proposed ballot question in California that would amend the state constitution to prohibit public agencies from granting preferential treatment based on race, sex, color, ethnicity or national origin.

White House officials fear that inclusion of the issue on the 1996 ballot will bring affirmative action into the forefront of California electoral politics. Two Republican presidential candidates, Senate Majority Leader Robert J. Dole (Kan.) and Sen. Phil Gramm (Tex.) already have made an issue of affirmative action.

Prominent Republicans have been vocal in their attacks on affirmative action although it is unclear how far they would go legislatively. Gramm has said if he is elected president he will end major set-aside programs on his first day in office. Dole has broadly questioned affirmative action programs and said in a recent television appearance that more than 60 percent of white males voted Republican in the last election "because of things like this, where sometimes the best qualified

person does not get the job because he or she may be one color. And I'm beginning to believe that may not be the way it should be in America."

And one of the party's more prominent conservative theoreticians, William Kristol, this week used his fax machine to send out his latest memo to Republicans asserting that a "major element" of the GOP effort once past the "Contract With America" provisions should be "a rollback of the massive system of racial preferences and set-asides that has come to infect federal law and American life over the past 25 years."

The president's immediate problem is how to respond to attacks on specific programs, such as this week's effort by House Republicans to pay for a health care tax deduction by repealing a tax break firms get for selling broadcast licenses to minorities. The White House is preparing for Republicans to find preferences that are difficult to defend, like some of the broadcast license awards, to try to box the president in continually defending racial preferences.

One senior administration official said of the White House "intense, urgent" review, which includes coordination with several departments and agencies, "Republicans come at this as 'Democrats support race-based quotas and set-asides and will give your job or your contract or some other break to someone just because they are black.'"

"We are now beginning serious conversations about the whole realm of issues involved here, given the president's fundamen-

tal commitments. We cannot turn away from affirmative action. The issue to us is, is there an approach to protect these programs, or most of these programs, in which we can also win the political argument?"

Vice President Gore has held a series of three private dinners, the final one Tuesday, involving a broad range of civil rights leaders, writers, educators, elected officials and others for discussions of race. The dinners are meant to spur an exchange of ideas on race and politics as issues such as affirmative action move into the forefront.

A senior administration official said Clinton won't back away from the "principle" of affirmative action. "Our base would go nuts" if the White House backed away in any significant way from affirmative action, the official said, "so it will take a lot of serious work and sophisticated effort to protect these programs in the current political climate."

Stephanopoulos said Clinton "has a history on these issues and feels very strongly" about the goal of using affirmative action to redress past discrimination and bring more nonwhites and women into the middle class. He said the president, in discussing the issue with congressional Democrats Wednesday, encouraged their leadership to collaborate in a review of the government programs.

Clinton has begun making the case that Republicans are trying to fuel anxiety among white middle-class voters.

In an interview with the American Urban Radio Network last week, he said, "I think this is a Congress that is highly political on some issues and wants to turn them into

wedges. . . . I realize at a time of high anxiety for majority voters, the temptation is almost irresistible by some to look for racial wedge issues."

His goal, Clinton said, is a full national debate about specific programs, their records and alternatives in a discussion "that will bring the American people together, not the onset of another political campaign designed to divide us."

In a separate radio interview last week, on the Tom Joyner Show, Clinton said, "I am hoping that instead of this being a bad thing that divides us, we can turn this thing on its head and take it away from the people who want to use it for pure politics. . . ."

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Clinton said his administration would "look at all the things that people call affirmative action" and "where there's evidence of discrimination, I think that affirmative remedies should lie." He added, "I think most people would admit that whenever there is evidence of discrimination in a particular case or group of cases, an affirmative remedy is an appropriate thing. The real question is, how far beyond that should you go?"

Officials point to polls that show that as overt, public racism has become unacceptable to most Americans, the belief has grown that discrimination, therefore, has significantly diminished. That makes a majority of Americans believe that granting special preferences for jobs or government contracts or school admissions or scholarships based on race are no longer needed and are unfair.

It has produced declining support for continuing three decades of affirmative action

and a sympathetic reception to Republican assertions that the government and courts should be "colorblind."

Those in the government committed to affirmative action and involved in monitoring it acknowledge that the abuse of some programs gives ammunition to critics. Deval Patrick, assistant attorney general for civil rights at the Justice Department, said in a recent Washington Post interview that "there is good affirmative action and I think there is bad affirmative action. I think we all have to face up to the fact that in some cases affirmative action is abused and I am not persuaded that the abuses you sometimes hear . . . are the rule rather than the exceptions."

Republicans clearly see a political advantage in taking on the fight. Republican National Committee Chairman Haley Barbour said, "I think if President Clinton defends quotas, speaks in favor of special preferences and supports reverse discrimination, I think that will divide him from the vast majority of American people."

From the other side of the political spectrum, the pressure is as intense. Jesse L. Jackson, one of those who attended the Gore dinners, said that instead of reviewing programs and "looking for ways to avoid the issue," Democrats should be "standing up and defending" one of the nation's "great success stories rather than having it turned into a wedge." If there are abuses, Jackson said, the administration should "find the abusers," not allow the programs to be killed or curtailed.