

Acel Moore *Urban Perspective*

Playing on affirmative-action fears

Based on the intensity of the current political assault on affirmative action across the country by many Republicans, conservative Democrats and even some African Americans, one might think that so-called "reverse discrimination" is at the heart of most of America's economic woes.

If you read the news stories about the debate, you'd think affirmative-action proposals were liberal Democratic initiatives that came out of the civil rights struggle of 30 years ago. You would think that they have outlived their usefulness and have severely limited the opportunities of white males to get government contracts, employment and education.

The reality is that although equal employment opportunity was largely a result of the civil rights movement and legislation enacted in the Democratic administration of Lyndon Johnson, affirmative-action initiatives such as set-asides, the Philadelphia Plan in the construction trade, goal-setting, timetables and other measures originated in the administration of Richard M. Nixon. The last I checked, he was a Republican.

Too bad, opponents of affirmative action say that qualified white workers and businesses are being replaced by unqualified black applicants in jobs, in contract awards and in admittance to colleges and universities.

However, statistics do not support that perception. In fact, there is no evidence to support those assumptions. Yet the debate has reached fever pitch, and opponents have convinced many Americans that those assumptions have in effect become reality.

In California, those who oppose affirmative-action measures are proposing a ballot initiative next year that would eliminate all state-sanctioned programs or discrimination remedies based on race or gender.

There is no doubt that affirmative-action programs have contributed to the emergence of a larger black middle class, but the most significant gains from affirmative action have been by white women.

But even with those gains by blacks, other minorities and white women, there is no objective evidence that there has been widespread discrimination against white men or lost opportunity for them based on affirmative-action remedies.

In fact, a Wall Street Journal story based on records of major corporations compiled by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission showed that black workers were the *only* racial group to suffer a net job loss during the 1990-'91 recession. The study said that whites, Hispanics, and Asians gained jobs during the downturn.

The federal government — the largest employer of African Americans — conducted a study of its workforce last year and found that blacks were fired for insubordination at a disproportionate rate, implying that racial differences, even racism, was a factor.

Another factor that is often overlooked in the debate is that the unemployment rate of black workers was twice that of whites when affirmative-action initiatives were begun, and it's still the case. Some African Americans have reached the top of the corporate ladder, but there are very few black chief executive officers among Fortune 500 companies.

The dreaded words "quotas" and "unquali-

fied" always surface in the debate and criticism of affirmative action.

What about quotas? There is no doubt that the most extreme remedy in the area of affirmative action is set-asides, which impose numerical quotas. Quotas are the red flag of affirmative action to its opponents.

Set-asides have been challenged in a number of lawsuits. In 1989, the conservative U.S. Supreme Court dealt the program a major blow by ruling that that Richmond, Va., could not set aside 30 percent of city contracts for racial minorities. The decision already has impacted drastically on number of blacks and minorities winning contracts. In Philadelphia, for example, 97 percent of all city contracts currently go to white contractors. Before the Richmond decision, during the administration of Mayor Goode, 80 percent of all contracts went to white men.

On an individual basis, some whites could likely argue that they were denied a position because the job was given to a black woman or another minority. But there is absolutely no evidence to support the notion that blacks are taking jobs away from whites.

Most affirmative-action policies of public and private corporations are not intrusive and do not discriminate against white workers. They are not quotas.

They are, however, efforts to ensure that minorities and women are part of the pool of job applicants. Those procedures promote the hiring of "qualified" women and minorities. Most do not mandate that employers hire any one particular group.

An economics professor who has studied the workforce and race discrimination told me this: Even if tomorrow, all unemployed

blacks replaced white workers, the impact on the total white workforce would be less than 2 percent.

White people, mostly white men, are making more than 90 percent of the personnel decisions in America now. So why the divisiveness and the political demagoguery?

Some feel, and I agree, that it is part of the Republican strategy to take over the White House. They are playing on the fears of the white middle class.

It is an us-against-them strategy: *They* are

unqualified. *They* are criminals. *They* are welfare cheats, and *they* are taking your jobs. The trouble with blacks is we have always been the "they." It is a dangerous and divisive game. The Nazis made the same arguments and spouted some of the same untruths before World War II in Europe.

What we need is the truth to emerge on subject of affirmative action. It is in short supply today.

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