

## Along the Color Line: Rethinking Affirmative Action

by Dr. Manning Marable  
(Part One of a Two Part Series)



Several nights ago, I stood on a street corner in midtown Manhattan, attempting to hail a taxicab late on a cold, frosty evening. I was wearing a business suit and topcoat, and carrying an oversized briefcase. Despite my outstretched arm, I watched as five medallion cabs in a row, which were "on duty" sped past. One cab even slowed down a little, apparently surveying the color

of my skin, and then speeded up.

I mention this little incident to illustrate that African-Americans and many other people of color can never forget the fundamental reasons for the adoption and institutionalization of affirmative action programs: discrimination and equality. A generation ago, the 1964 Civil Rights Act was passed to outlaw legal racial segregation in public accommodations. At that time, banks openly and routinely denied credit to Blacks and Hispanics; white universities refused to admit most minority students; unions often refused to train women and minorities as apprentices; and corporations rejected well-qualified women and people of color from most positions. Even today, thirty years after the original adoption of affirmative action, programs which factor into account the real historic and contemporary patterns of discrimination rooted in gender and racial inequality, minorities remain grossly underrepresented in many white collar professions.

For example, African-Americans and Latinos represent 12.4 percent and 9.5 percent respectively of the U.S. adult population. But of all American physicians, Blacks account for barely 4.2 percent, and Latinos 5.2 percent. Among engineers, Blacks represent 3.7 percent, Latinos 3.3 percent; among lawyers, Blacks account for 3.3 percent, Latinos 3.1 percent; and for all university and college professors, Blacks made up 5 percent, Latinos 2.9 percent.

When median annual earnings are compared by race and gender, most white males remain in a dominant position. The median earnings of Black and Hispanic males are only 74 percent and 65 percent, respectively, of those of white males. Black women and Latinos also fall behind white males, at 64 percent and 54 percent of white males' median salaries. White women, who numerically have been the primary and overwhelming beneficiaries of affirmative action programs, earn roughly 70 cents per every dollar earned by white males. Especially in managerial, administrative

and higher salaried positions, millions of qualified Black Americans, Hispanics and women still are frequently excluded from consideration. Overall, Blacks still suffer twice the rate of unemployment as whites.

It is in this context that the recent political and ideological assault on affirmative action must be understood. Americans have made significant progress to reduce institutional discrimination, yet the struggle for full representation and equality for women and people of color for jobs, incomes, and across the board has scarcely been won. Nevertheless, a deep and hostile impression exists among millions of Americans that affirmative action policies have gone "too far," and that white males have become the victims of "reverse discrimination." In 1989, the Supreme Court overturned a program in Richmond, Virginia, which set aside 30 percent of all municipal contracts favoring racial minorities. In several court cases, whites are challenging the use of different admission standards which increase Black and Hispanic enrollments, and scholarships designated for minority students.

In Congress last month, the House voted overwhelmingly to cancel a tax deferment which helped companies selling television, radio and cable stations to minorities. Since 1978, this tax break helped to increase Black and Hispanic ownership of broadcast outlets 600 percent. African-Americans in Congress interpreted this crucial vote as the first in a series of legislative assaults on minority set-aside and affirmative action programs. Rep. Kweisi Mfume (D-MD), declared, "The people around the country are looking at this and seeing a race debate."

But the most important attack against affirmative action nationally is being waged in California. Two conservative academics, Tom Wood and Glynn Custred, have proposed the California Civil Rights Initiative, which if passed next year, would outlaw race and gender based preferences in hiring, government contracts and school admissions. *USA Today* reports that the proponents of California's anti-affirmative action initiative are now joining forces with antitax groups, building a vast coalition of conservative voters favoring smaller government and fewer regulations.

Although we must emphasize that affirmative action remains necessary in order to address real patterns of discrimination in employment and throughout society, it is also clear that a majority of Americans now favor the elimination of such programs and policies. The question now confronts progressives and liberals, as well as others who have favored the creation of a just society: Where do we go from here? We must move toward the development of remedies which simultaneously accomplish two objectives: first, eliminate discrimination through the creation of greater opportunities for racial minorities and women, and second, the implementation of such policies which are framed within a single standard of excellence, and cannot be challenged as "quotas." We need to begin a national dialogue around these objectives, and begin to move forward.

*Dr. Manning Marable is Professor of History and Director of the Institute for Research in African-American Studies, Columbia University, New York City.*