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## **Business and Race: "Only Halfway There"**

**The father of affirmative action is pleased with today's diversity in the workplace but says business still has a long way to go.**

**Arthur A. Fletcher**

Arthur A. Fletcher, 75, may just be the father of affirmative action. A World War II veteran (he served under Patton) and former professional football player (for the Los Angeles Rams and the Baltimore Colts), he joined the Republican Party in the 1940s. Later, as Assistant Secretary of Labor under President Richard Nixon, he helped craft rules that made the original affirmative-action legislation more enforceable.

Before Fletcher came along, affirmative action was a relatively feeble notion because laws outlined in the Civil Rights Act of 1964--which, among other provisions, barred discrimination in the workplace--did not force employers to keep track of the number of minorities and women they hired. Fletcher gave the program teeth by aligning affirmative action with procurement laws governing hiring policies in the public sector. Fletcher's ideas, spelled out in a document called the Revised Philadelphia Plan, are still the basis for affirmative-action enforcement. Fletcher remains a passionate



advocate for affirmative action, speaking regularly to business audiences and advising managers and executives on diversity. He spoke recently with FORTUNE writer Eryn Brown.

I'm proud to be able to say I set the stage for today's workplace and work force diversity efforts. Affirmative action changed the American workplace for the better, forever. And despite the efforts by opportunists like [anti-affirmative-action leader] Ward Connerly to undermine the rules and spirit of affirmative action, it should remain in place indefinitely.

Over the past 30 years, affirmative action has made pursuing economic equity a rational, reasonable, and achievable goal for all American taxpayers. Yet as we move into a new millennium, the sad truth is we are only halfway home, with a very long way to go. How long? At least another 50 years, if not a full century.

A lot of people--including too many corporate executives--still believe many professions are too difficult and complex for anyone but white men. But there's not a single industry in which you will not find women, African Americans, Asians, or Hispanics performing at almost every level, including management. The change is real. It is permanent. And I consider myself blessed to have lived to see it happen.

I know I'm closer to the end of the journey, but I hardly think my work is done. I still lecture corporate executives all across the nation, as often as 30 or 40 times a year, explaining my vision of equal opportunity. I'm the keeper of the flame. I have to be. Affirmative action's opponents have been at war with us for 30 years. But despite a few defeats regarding set-aside programs, the courts have largely remained on our side. We've seen people use isolated cases where affirmative action may not be working to get anti-affirmative-action referendums on the ballots. Then they



lie to voters to sway public opinion. But laws aren't made from anecdotes. I won't be concerned about the Supreme Court, the U.S. Congress, or the state legislatures ending affirmative action until someone comes up with a study proving white males have really been discriminated against in the workplace.

But legislation alone is not enough to keep affirmative action alive. In fact, I don't need any more public policy. I need corporate America to do what it alleges it can do--make it work. For years business leaders screamed for less government: "Get out of our way. Let us show you how to get things done." So Congress redirected money from Washington to cities, to states, and to the private sector. Okay, corporate America, the ball's in your court, the reins are in your hands.

One thing's for sure: Companies that ignore diversity will struggle to flourish in the global marketplace during the 21st century. According to Department of Labor statistics, the pool of talent that will supply the next generation of employees, managers, and executives will soon be dominated by women and ethnic minorities. They will be hard to ignore.

**Next Section:** [Look at what's already happening as a result of the growing Hispanic population in the U.S.](#) ►►

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