

William Raspberry

Reaffirming Affirmative Action

Hugh Price, the Urban League president who warmed conservative cockles last summer with his don't-blame-it-all-on-racism admonition, told an interesting story the other day.

It was the spring of 1963, he said, and he had "really butchered" his test for admission to law school. He had been an outstanding high school student, and a solid B scholar at Amherst. But the law board score ("probably 200 points below that of the average white enrollee") threatened to derail his legal ambitions.

But Yale Law admitted him anyway—in part, no doubt, because of his race. And then . . .

"Despite that miserable test score, my grades at Yale never scraped absolute bottom. If memory serves, I finished toward the lower end of the middle third of our class. Since we had only seven blacks out of 150 students in my class, that obviously means there were many white students with higher law board tests beneath me in the rankings. Nearly all of those in the bottom quarter were white. At my 20th reunion, several Yale classmates said I was one of the 'stars' of our class."

Price, who seven months ago in Indianapolis was reminding black Americans of the need to take responsibility for their own lives, was, last week in San Francisco, warning white Americans against the out-of-hand dismissal of affirmative action.

It isn't so much that the 53-year-old Price has changed his tune as that he wants you to hear his whole song. The self-help verse is familiar, and it had an incredible range of politicians and editorialists pronouncing him "wise" and "sensible." The

affirmative action verse is likely to grate on ears that hear the phrase to mean giving preference to undeserving minorities.

Price both understands the resistance and acknowledges the abuses committed in the name of affirmative action. But he cites his own law school experience to make the point that if merit, as measured by test scores, is a value worth preserving, so is inclusion, as measured by actual—not merely theoretical—opportunity.

It was a speech, not a legislative proposal, he delivered at the Commonwealth Club, so don't look for the language of lawyers and legislators. But his actual language is interesting. First, he avoids what I used to call the "merit trap"—the notion that if *some* of a thing is good, more of it must be better. This is the trap that leads us to believe that since reporters need to know how to type, the aspiring journalist who types 100 words per minute has more "merit" than the one who types just well enough to pass the cut-off. Or as Price puts it:

"It seems to me that the crucial issue in crafting admissions or hiring policies is to define the threshold qualifications or competencies for what it takes to perform satisfactorily in school or on the job. With those baseline criteria in place, the institution or employer could then utilize selection standards and procedures that enable it to fulfill its fundamental missions."

And one of those missions is (or ought to be) "to serve society by sending out well-trained graduates from all sectors and segments of society—into the private sector, of course, but also into public life,

into the non-profit world, and into distressed neighborhoods."

Price's attitude makes sense to those of us who have benefited (knowingly or not) from affirmative action and who take it as perfectly reasonable to look somewhat more favorably at the candidate whose presence would add to the "diversity" of the institution and the healing of a still-torn society. We make a common-sense distinction between (1) giving the minority the nod in close cases and (2) *legislating* racial preference, or assigning race-based merit points.

But some people—not all of them racists (and not all of them white)—make no such distinction. They believe that once you start chipping at the edges of merit, you're approaching "reverse discrimination," giving coveted places to people who don't belong in them.

Price, recalling the furor over the discovery a few years back that blacks were admitted to Georgetown Law with lower Law School Aptitude Test scores than whites, answers with some interesting questions.

Were the lower scores enough to make the black students undeserving of admission? Were all black students—and only black students—scraping bottom? Surely *some* whites must have been in the lower percentiles. Were they, on that account, also undeserving?

Good questions, to which I add these two: Will the people who lately celebrated Hugh Price's self-help exhortations still consider him reasonable and wise? Will they love him in February as they did in August?