

Ted Van Dyk

Affirmative Action Distractions

Unless our leaders start to act like leaders, the country is only a few days away from the wrong national debate about the wrong issue at the wrong time. The issue is affirmative action, which in the 1990s has taken on the false symbolic importance that busing embodied in the 1970s.

President Clinton, Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole and leaders of the Congressional Black Caucus have the power to declare a cease-fire in what could become the social and political equivalent of a nuclear war. They need to step up and do it now.

The president is mulling his proper political response to a series of pending affirmative action court cases and to a prospective 1996 California initiative that would in effect ban affirmative action. To buy time, he has called for a federal review of affirmative action programs, and his Justice Department has brought suit against Illinois State University on behalf of white men seeking janitorial jobs at present reserved for blacks.

Sen. Dole, the front runner for the Republican presidential nomination in 1996, is a longstanding friend of equal opportunity and minority progress. But he recently has made public statements exploiting white anxiety about affirmative action. Other Republican presidential aspirants have followed suit. Some members of the Black Caucus, and black non-elected leaders as well, have equated opposition to affirmative action with racism. They know better. A false litmus issue is emerging that could overwhelm all other political debate over the next two years.

How on earth did we come to this? Affirmative

action was intended as nothing more than a late footnote to central civil rights and social legislation of the early and mid-1960s meant to remove from American life discrimination against—or for—any person or group. The objective of a generation of civil-rights fighters of all races and colors had been to give every American an equal chance at the starting line—but not a guaranteed outcome at the finish line.

My old boss Hubert Humphrey, principal sponsor of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, made clear during congressional debate that quotas, racial preferences, set-asides and other discriminatory measures were totally at odds with the justice sought through the act. Title VII of the act, in fact, explicitly bans preferences by race, gender, ethnicity and religion.

Affirmative action was seen as a temporary, transitional measure, compensating for generations of past discrimination and oppression. I recall a 1971 conversation with Humphrey, then returned to the Senate, in which he expressed fundamental reservations about affirmative action and feared it could become a dangerous crutch for minorities and an easy target for those who would deny them opportunity.

No one could have predicted then that affirmative action would be transformed into a quasi-entitlement or that well-meaning next-generation leaders, including President Clinton and Hillary Rodham Clinton, would insist on rigid racial, gender and ethnic quotas in filling federal appointments.

We were not so naive during the Great Society

era as to believe that passage of civil rights legislation would create genuine opportunity for people still miles behind the rest of the country. Thus we took practical steps to help equip all Americans, but particularly minority groups that had the most to overcome, to lift themselves. We made major public investments in bottom-up, person-by-person development: improvements in public education, nutrition, health care, housing, job and skill training.

Though many Great Society programs proved less than cost effective, others, such as Head Start and Job Corps, continue to enjoy broad public support and respect. Since that time pervasive drug trafficking and use, violent crime, illegitimacy and family breakup have become added barriers to upward economic and social mobility.

Given these challenges, and the need to meet them with renewed commitment, the whole issue of affirmative action is an irrelevancy and a distraction. It has led to the false belief among many white Americans that minorities want something for nothing and that achievement and merit have been made subsidiary in American life to compensate for past-generation injustice.

An episodic series of stories—of contracts awarded unfairly, of college admissions denied to qualified students, of promotions given on the basis of race—has created a climate in which any relevant referendum, such as the one contemplated in California, almost certainly will result in a 70-30 vote against the concept.

While affirmative action is in the spotlight, a far larger and more important game is being played

and lost in Congress. House Speaker Newt Gingrich and other conservative Republicans, asserting their desire to cut federal spending or to undertake a devolution of federal power, are concentrating on cutting programs that mean hope and outright survival to minorities and others still struggling upward.

Meanwhile, looking nervously at middle-class votes, both the president and congressional Republicans are further punishing poor and minority Americans by promising new tax-cut bribes while pledging to keep Social Security and other entitlement spending off, or nearly off, the cutting table.

America needs a great debate, all right. But the debate should not be about affirmative action any more than it should have been about busing 20 years ago. It should not exploit or amplify race-based tensions. It should be about the purposes of our country and our hopes for the future. It should focus on real measures that will help individual people get their truly equal chance.

Down deep, Americans believe in fairness and justice just as much today as they did in the social breakthrough period of the mid-'60s. They readily accept what we fought for inch by inch then. What is different today is that we lack committed leaders willing to level with the people about the price we must pay together to reach our promised land.

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