

Affirmative Action Will Survive Changes Despite Racial Bigotry

By JAMES E. ALSBROOK

The recent flood of media comment about affirmative action has produced a bewildering confusion of myths, truths, half-truths and lies about Black people. Perhaps the most absurd lie has been told by presidential candidate Phil Gramm who said that if elected, he would turn affirmative action around to the good old days when every American was treated fairly and equally. Such days never existed.

Among the more rational comments, however, was the statement that much wrong has been done by race discrimination in employment and that remedies are appropriate. Writers cited these examples of when affirmative action is needed:

1. When an individual competes for a job, meets all physical and mental requirements but is rejected simply because he or she is a Black, a female or another minority.
2. When all qualified and job-seeking members of a group are summarily rejected for employment because of customs, traditions or unexplained management policies.
3. When a private or public employer wishes to make a public statement or demonstrate a progressive change, thus creating a new role model for Blacks and a social statement to society.
4. When an employer wishes to benefit from the special input of a new person or to comply with the wishes of a group that significantly contributes to the good of his company.

But none of these writers or commentators sensed the terrible and continuing aspect of historic employment ceilings based on skin color. With affirmative action, the psychological wounds have been slowly healing. But without affirmative action, one can expect an increas-

ing return to past discrimination and racial discord.

A backward glance reveals these facts:

- The first semblance of significant affirmative action came when President Roosevelt in the '30s issued an executive order stating that equal employment opportunities and equal pay must be given all defense plant workers regardless of race or sex.

- Further affirmative action came when President Truman ordered the armed forces to integrate shortly after World War II. Job opportunities requiring professional skills were made available to all applicants.

- Working in an integrated army with access to its best training and equipment, Black doctors, engineers and other professionals received equal pay for equal work along with non-racial promotion opportunities.

- The 1954 school desegregation decision had some immediate effect on affirmative action, but its major import was that it set the national mood for the civil rights "revolution" of the '60s.

- Affirmative action received one big boost in the early '60s when white ministers in the North were revolted by "Bull" Connors, his biting dogs, water hoses and other police-inflicted violence in the Jim Crow states. These ministers preached peace, condemned Southern repression and agreed with Dr. King and his program.

- Affirmative action was accelerated by President Johnson who cautiously but persistently pressured America to accept Black Americans as first-class citizens. Johnson cooperated with Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, Whitney Young of the Urban League, and Dr.

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King, the hero of the hour. Civil rights figures such as Stokely Carmichael, Rap Brown, James Farmer, Malcolm X and others were demanding general betterment for Black people.

Some employers have deliberately hired incompetent Black persons in order to "prove a point" or "make a statement." But these instances have been few.

The abolition of affirmative action will not occur regardless of the yelpings of right-wing extremists and racists. If Democrats get job-holding women thoroughly involved, the politicians will back away and Clinton will compromise somewhat by making some affirmative action more flexible.

But the basic value of affirmative action cannot be hidden, and the nation's conscience, touched by women and Blacks, will not tolerate its destruction.

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