

THE OBSERVER

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■ AND IN THIS CORNER

Zapped: Elimination of affirmative action leaves little hope

At the close of last week, the governor of Louisiana, Mike Foster, abolished affirmative action in his state.

What a way to end Black History Month.

I can't help but see a developing "conservative" trend in "racial relations" in the United States.

First, the Republican-controlled Congress demanded President Clinton eliminate affirmative action.

Matthew Apple

Next, the California Board of Regents voted to cancel the long-standing state university affirmative action recruiting policy, provoking wide-spread but ineffectual student protest.

And now, in the state that gave us Mardi Gras, jazz, and Dixie Voodoo Lager, a white, Republican governor has outright eliminated a program which costs a miniscule three million, amounting to about one percent of the Louisiana state budget, for "financial reasons."

Affirmative action has had its share of controversy over the past thirty years, but never before has the entire concept come under such concentrated fire. The majority of attacks claim to be in the interest of "fairness" in academia and the business world.

In conjunction with the anti-minority rantings of canny politicians which not only take advantage of barely suppressed "white" sentiments but also enflame them to dangerous proportions, this furor over affirmative action seems headed toward a nationwide LA-Watts reenactment. Some people on both sides

apparently want open confrontations, perhaps finding violence easier than constructive dialogue.

I myself have somewhat mixed feelings about the way affirmative action works today. Recent proposals that the scope of affirmative action be augmented to include all families under a certain economic level seems fair to me. Though there are plenty of white families living in poverty, there are many, many more black families living in much more dangerous conditions, and these families would still benefit the most from a new "economic action" program.

This "reformation" of affirmative action ought to quell the argument that the concept "discriminates" against whites — that is, if anyone in office bothered to take reformation seriously. No one in Washington seems interested in doing anything but attacking and slashing these days. Good-bye, Great Society.

On the other hand the supposed "degrading" nature of affirmative action confuses me. There is no question that many families need help. My family needs help. We rarely get any, but if we are offered it, we take it. This does not mean that we believe it utterly impossible to get ahead and therefore have stopped even trying; it simply means we recognize that we need all the help we can get.

Personal pride should not get in the way of practicality. The government cannot be held responsible for how people feel about themselves. That's what parents are for.

I've been told that affirmative action somehow "insults" black families by implying that they are otherwise unable to succeed in the "white world." Some claim that offering "undeserved" opportunities to black families enforces laziness or a mass "victim" complex. Some believe that affirmative action discourages self-reliance and lowers self-confidence, making black families too dependent upon the government.

The way I see it, the most important

aspect of affirmative action is not the precise numbers of minorities who are accepted into positions they might not otherwise receive, but the intangible.

Affirmative action's real benefit is the attempt to change cultural attitudes. At first it was deemed necessary to force companies to accept blacks as equals. It may be true now that this supposed coercion is no longer necessary, that equality is more a reality than it was

'Affirmative Action's real benefit is the attempt to change cultural attitudes.'

thirty years ago when affirmative action began.

Yet if this is true, why is there little change in the structure of American society? Why are there still racial dividers thrown up around the U.S., seemingly at random? Why are even blacks insisting that they prefer to segregate themselves, denying that people of different "races" can live together as equals?

I have to wonder why people still insist upon dividing themselves into neat and tidy categories as if they were mere objects and not human beings. I see nothing wrong with ethnic pride, but there's no reason why we should use our cultural differences as an excuse to hate each other.

Has affirmative action indeed been a failure? Even though it seems obvious that things have improved drastically since the mid-'60s, I honestly can't say for sure that affirmative action is in part responsible.

What affirmative action does do is provide a feeling of hope where previously there may have been little or none. Why

else would 7,000 people protest in Baton Rouge? Obviously, they felt strongly enough about affirmative action to organize against its dismissal.

Again, some would probably argue that these protesters were "weak" for demanding "whitey" give them money. I say that the outright banning of affirmative action, marginal though its monetary benefits may be, appears as yet another slap in the face from the white man in power.

Even if the Louisiana governor is not racist, even if Foster believes he did the right thing, by completely and suddenly eliminating the program instead of reforming it, he makes himself appear racist and sets an unsettling precedent.

The fact that ex-presidential candidate and KKK-leader David Duke supports Governor Foster does not help matters any.

No amount of legislation can change people's cultural attitudes, and simply giving away undeserved job opportunities on the basis of "race" may be unfair and/or unethical.

Still, it strikes me as odd that in a country where nearly half the population is called a "racial minority," well-respected universities can crow about a whopping 6 percent minority student population. And I have to wonder how many of those 6 percent were sought for academic reasons instead of money-making sports reasons.

There remain few hopes for economically disadvantaged youth of any color. Most hope to be the next Michael Jordan or Deion Sanders, blessed with the athletic ability to occupy people's minds with meaningless statistics rather than real problems this country faces.

With the affirmative action precedent set by Governor Foster, hopes for nearly unattainable sports careers may soon be the only hopes left.

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■ D

GARRY TRUDEAU



■ QUOTE OF THE DAY

"The law is not thrust upon man; it rests deep within him, to waken when the call comes."

—Martin Buber