

The battle over affirmative action

Fighting the new Jim Crow

By Jonn Lunsford

“Everyone knows that I have been the leading political figure in the country in opposition to [affirmative action]. Everybody knows that [mainstream] politicians ducked the issue until they observed my success.”

— David Duke

For once David Duke is right: he had been the leading opponent of affirmative action — until the California Republican Party, Governor Pete Wilson and a host of others discovered that they stood to gain politically by confusing voters on the subject and urging them to vote against it.

to include other racial groups, women, Vietnam veterans and people with disabilities.

After he crafted the first affirmative action statutes in 1965, President Lyndon Johnson explained the need: “You do not take a man who for years has been hobbled by chains, liberate him, bring him to the starting line of a race, saying, “you are free to compete with all the others,” and still justly believe you have been completely fair. We seek not just freedom, but opportunity.”

The need for that opportunity remains because discrimination still exists. In the US, people of color own nine percent of all businesses and women own 34 percent, but together they receive less than nine percent of \$200 billion in annual federal contracts. Women and people of color make up 57 percent of the work force in Fortune 2000 companies but only 5 percent of the senior management positions. On average, women earn 70 cents to every dollar that men earn, and African American men earn 75 cents to every dollar earned by white men.

Despite such glaring inequalities there has been a steady attack on affirmative action since its inception. Initial support was broad and bipartisan, but resistance came in the form of filibusters from southern Senators and the rallies by the Ku Klux Klan. The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 brought a new assault on affirmative action. Reagan slashed the budgets of agencies charged with enforcing civil rights employment laws, appointed conservative judges, and confused the public by labeling affirmative action as “reverse discrimination” or “racial quotas.” The five conservatives appointed to the Supreme Court by Presidents Reagan and Bush whittled away at affirmative action, but stopped short of completely dismantling it.

Now the battleground over the future of affirmative action has moved from the courts to the states. In 1996, California passed Proposition 209, a law that banned affirmative action for women and minorities in California’s public sector. Washington State will vote on a similar measure this November called Initiative 200. In 1998, thirteen other states introduced legislation to end affirmative

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Affirmative action supporters rally in Seattle, WA.

After watching affirmative action being attacked and weakened for the past twenty years, its supporters want to turn the tide in their favor. They argue affirmative action has proven successful. In 1970, women were only seven percent of the physicians in the US; now they make up 25 percent. In 1973, the Los Angeles Fire Department was 94 percent white, now it is 26 percent Latino, 13 percent African American and six percent Asian.

Affirmative Action was created to secure equal access for African Americans who had suffered centuries of violence and discrimination from slavery through Jim Crow segregation and who had been systematically denied opportunities in employment, education, and government contracts. The program was later expanded

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action for people of color and women, but these failed to qualify for a vote. Through these state campaigns anti-affirmative action activists hope to prove their strength and build support in Congress for changes in federal law.

One organization working to roll back affirmative action state by state is the American Civil Rights Institute (ACRI). It came out of California's fight over affirmative action and has raised money from conservative foundations and individuals to push this movement nationwide. Their work has paid off.

In Washington State ACRI kicked in over \$160,000 at a crucial point in the campaign. This was nearly half of the money raised by the anti-affirmative action campaign at the time and was an invaluable shot in the arm in the drive to qualify the initiative. During California's fight over Proposition 209 it took more than 20 pro-affirmative action groups to come close to matching the money the top five anti-affirmative action groups raised.

Opponents of affirmative action rely on confusion and ignorance about this sometimes complicated program. ACRI calls their measures, "civil rights initiatives" and absurdly claims Martin Luther King Jr. would have supported them. They have a conservative Black spokesman in the person of Ward Connerly, who shields right-wing funders from charges of racism and further confuses voters on the issue. The strategy worked in California, where a *Los Angeles Times* exit poll found that 28 percent of those who voted for Proposition 209 actually support affirmative action programs.

Opponents of affirmative action would like people to forget that discrimination which created the need for affirmative action still exists. In places where restrictions on affirmative action are now law, women and minorities have lost important gains. In Virginia, after a court case eliminated affirmative action in government contracting, the share of public dollars going to minority-owned contractors fell from nearly 40 percent to 2.2 percent. In California's public university system, admission of Black and Hispanic students for fall of 1998 has dropped by 66 and 33 percent, respectively, since Proposition 209 went into effect last year.

In Washington State a great irony has

surfaced: statistics show that white men actually benefit more from affirmative action in state hiring than any minority group due to programs for veterans and people with disabilities.

The No on 200 Campaign hopes that by demonstrating how many people in Washington are assisted by affirmative action they can clear up the myths and defeat Initiative 200 in November. "Affirmative action benefits Washington by opening our schools and jobs to qualified people who are shut out by discrimination," says Kelly Evans, Campaign Director for No on 200. "I believe voters will reject Initiative 200 once they understand the damage it will do. Now we need people to support us with their money, time, and energy so we can show voters that affirmative action works."

What was once ground where only David Duke would tread has grown into a mainstream conservative attack on affirmative action. It is crucial to stop this campaign now before it builds into successful nationwide movement. Last fall voters in Houston supported affirmative action by rejecting an ACRI sponsored initiative. Washington is the next place where progressive activists hope they can build on this success and protect affirmative action

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