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STATEMENT

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## Quotas and Affirmative Action

Awhile ago there was a popular saying that went something like this: "If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem." I was always bothered by the suggestion that if you didn't jump on the right bandwagon your name would be mud or something a lot worse. And the neat problem-solution equation usually was accompanied by some gross, self-righteous over-simplification of a complicated social issue. I've learned that a good rule of thumb is that the more complex and controversial the issue, the more one should resist the temptation of simple answers and the harder one must work to maintain a clear perspective. Nowhere is this more evident than with regard to the highly charged question of underrepresentation and underutilization with relation to affirmative action.

Consider, for example, the "problem" of the employment of blacks and women in the academic world. In proportion to their numbers in the general population they are vastly underrepresented in tenured, college-level teaching positions. A simple solution, obviously, would be to hire more. But, as Thomas Sowell pointed out a few years ago, another reading of the statistics shows that blacks and women are actually overrepresented in faculty positions relative to their percentage of the Ph. D. population. Therefore, is there really a problem? If so, the solution doesn't lie with a reformation of hiring practices but in an area far more difficult to deal with. We have to make sure we do our homework before we presume to prescribe for the ills of the world.

My second caveat is that we have to carefully consider the

consequences of the kind of affirmative action we take to bring about better utilization and representation. For instance, I'm opposed to quotas as an affirmative action strategy because of the great potential for harm they have on many levels.

First of all, quotas have what Bayard Rustin called a "devastating psychological effect" on the very people they are designed to help. No matter how benign their intention, those who want to load the dice in favor of one group or another in employment or education, who want to mandate that a person be given a job or admitted to law school because of his or her race or ethnic background, are in effect making a statement that some people can't make it on their own and need to be given an absolute advantage over any competition. The result is to confer a quasi-official status of inferiority on the beneficiaries of the favored treatment. Also, members of the targetted group who do succeed on their merits may well find that their achievements will forever be suspect because of an identification with those who were given a "free ride."

Quotas also help create what Sowell describes as a "poisonous atmosphere" in society. All those of the "wrong kind" who failed to get a job or were denied admission to a school, even though their chances might have been slim in the first place, can easily blame their lack of success on the unfairness of the quota systems or on an affirmative action program. Quotas offer a ready-made, highly visible scapegoat for all sorts of frustrations. In this way, racial antagonism and ethnic hostility are perpetuated and intensified,

grievances fester and proliferate.

Also, there's something fundamentally contrary to the American spirit in making the group a person belongs to more important than the individual himself, warts and all. Those of us who were active in the civil rights movement of the 50's and 60's wanted to help create a color-blind society in which all people would be judged on their own merits, on whether they could do the job or measure up to the accepted standards. Traditionally, what rights we have adhere to us as individuals. Any insistence that group membership is a paramount qualification or disqualification is divisive, encouraging narrow loyalties and a "Lebanonization" of our social order.

Furthermore, we tend to blunt our sensibility by a preoccupation with quotas or ideal proportions in employment or school enrollment. Numbers become an end in themselves; justice and equity are secondary and individual people begin to drift into abstractions. We run the danger of losing the sense that we are dealing with the fate of real lives. After all, favoritism for one translates into prejudice against another with the attendant consequences.

In his essay "Marrakech," George Orwell draws a powerful metaphor for an insensitive society. Each afternoon as he sat at the window of his rented house in the heat of the Moroccan summer, the author noticed that several large bundles of sticks passed by in the street outside. It was only after several days that he realized that there was a withered old woman under each bundle serving as a beast of burden. He was disturbed by the realization that he had begun to

adopt the perspective of the society he was visiting where poor people simply disappeared into the landscape; suffering and injustice became invisible. Similarly, there is a danger that individuals can disappear into a landscape of quotas or ideology.

Equally ominous are the tactics of those who have a clear and righteous vision of the ideal statistical social order. Their benevolence usually ends in some form of coercion, a federal fiat or administrative mandate almost always coupled with the threat of the loss of financial support for non-compliance. Whatever the situation, the numbers have to come out right, often in defiance of justice and common sense. We remember, for example, that a few years ago the administrator of desegregation of the Cleveland public school system ordered that all varsity basketball teams in a particular district have two white players on the roster to satisfy a 20% quota. There was apparently no concern that perhaps two better black players had to be bumped. Sometimes it's hard to tell the spirit of reform from the spirit of totalitarianism.

The implications of the continuing debate about affirmative action or quotas or underrepresentation or underutilization or however one defines the issues go far beyond a particular industry, profession or academic institution. Our response will define the kind of country we want to live in. The establishment of a favored status for one group inevitably becomes a precedent. Today gender or color may be the decisive factors, but tomorrow others may argue that national origin or religious persuasion are equally worthy of special

consideration. This new "tribalism" points the way to fragmentation and discord.

These caveats should not blind us to the conditions that have inspired the call for quotas or other affirmative action programs. Obviously all too many people still remain outside the economic mainstream of American life. There is underrepresentation and underutilization, but I know this not by looking exclusively at graphs or percentages but by seeing individuals, in the streets, in the schools, and in dead-end jobs who, for one reason or another, have not been able to realize their innate potential. They have to be helped. But my interest is in changing people, not changing standards or fiddling with the rules to produce the "right" statistics.

An unfortunate consequence of the legal enforcement of some affirmative action programs has been to reduce standards, to call for the minimum possible. The main problem today about accepting examinations in education or other fields is that minorities do not pass the examinations in the same proportion as nonminority groups. But that only proves that as a result of previous discrimination and current disadvantages we still have a great deal to overcome.

It is very difficult to define precisely what kind of test is exactly relevant to the performance of a particular job. Can anyone really prove that it's good for an elementary school teacher to know something about Shakespeare or about algebra? I can't prove it, but I would not want to send my children to a school where the teacher

only knew what had to be taught to the children in that grade.

Fortunately, we have excellent examples of what can be done to change lives for the better without compromising our standards. For example, the United Federation of Teachers-New York City Board of Education career ladder program for paraprofessionals offers many, mostly minority women, the opportunity to leave the welfare rolls for meaningful work in the city's classrooms coupled with the means of achieving full professional status. What began as a pilot project in 1967 with 1500 participants grew, in less than five years, to a highly successful program employing 15,000. By 1974, with tuition reimbursement, almost all of the paraprofessionals had earned their high school equivalency diplomas, 6000 were enrolled in college, 300 had earned their college diplomas and 100 had gone on to become licensed teachers in the city schools. The effort has been described by one of its participants as "the most successful antipoverty program ever created that is still in existence...genuine affirmative action, without racial quotas, goals or any other negative factors."

Another example of the right kind of affirmative action was developed by Ernest Green, then ~~Director~~<sup>de</sup> of Recruitment and Training Programs<sup>g</sup> at the A. Philip Randolph Institute. He placed thousands of minority workers in the construction trade unions. He did this not through quotas or special reserved places but by recruiting promising candidates, many of whom were high school dropouts, and providing special training for them. The approach worked, and thousands of minority youngsters who otherwise might have been social dropouts and a burden to the community were able to achieve high scores on

qualifying tests.

The importance of such skills-development projects was nicely summed up recently by the historian Diane Ravitch: "In the long run, the ability of minorities to sustain the occupational and educational gains of the past fifteen years depends not only on those who can hold their own academically, and not only on those who win union jobs but on those who can do the job well."

The key is education, everything from early childhood education (which studies have shown to make significant, positive differences in later life) / to job training programs. Progressive spokesmen and organizations should be united on this, particularly in opposing current Administration policies that would rip apart proven outreach programs.

Those who insist on quotas weaken our common cause by undermining public support. As Ben Wattenberg pointed out in The Real America, Americans want fairness for all citizens and are even willing to go so far as to use their taxes to pay for special treatment like job training for those who have suffered past injustices. But they will not buy anything that smacks of unfairness. Wattenberg argues that segments of the civil rights movement diluted their power and committed a serious tactical blunder by seeking to implement policies like quotas that struck most Americans as being manifestly unfair.

One of the lessons we should have learned from the history of our sad century is that nothing regarding the human condition can be taken for granted, least of all a stable social order. We have to work at preserving the best that we have. The right kind of affirmative action, I think, will make us a stronger, more just and



humane society. An essential step in this direction is to keep it fixed in our minds that behind the statistics and the percentages there are real people all of whom have a claim to fair treatment. If this knowledge does not make us wiser it should at least make us less rash in our judgment, more willing to see the complexity of our problems and less eager to right old wrongs with new injustices.