

# Affirmative Action

Extend It

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The term, affirmative action, was first entered into the language by President John F. Kennedy, in his Executive Order 10925 of 1961, in which he called for aggressive hiring of minorities by the Federal government. The passage of Civil Rights legislation in the late 1960s and the impact of the massive anti-racist struggles waged throughout the United States expanded the idea of affirmative action beyond the immediate locus of Kennedy's memo.

For the majority of black people, affirmative action means an aggressive struggle against white racism and racist practices. It also provides a practical method for achieving and enforcing the improvement of the material condition of black Americans.

The current swarm of affirmative action opponents—among them, California Governor Pete Wilson, Senator Phil Gramm and Newt Gingrich—have distorted its function and purpose with an array of buzz words such as “racial preference, reverse racism,” and the like that would construe affirmative action as an instrument which inflicts racial abuse and hardship upon America's Caucasian population.

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Source: *The Black Scholar*, Vol. 25, No. 3, Affirmative Action (Summer 1995).

Racial preference exists in the United States—but it continues to benefit white Americans, as it has for the past 375 years.

Despite the brief flowering of constructive programs during the 1960s and 1970s and the persistence today of a highly cosmetized black middle class, institutional and structural racism still infects American society. Thanks largely to civil rights retrenchment and rollbacks during the Reagan-Bush administrations, black family income is now 56 percent of white family income. Black family income has not been that low since the 1950s.

If there is such a palpable decline in black employment and income, how can affirmative action be accurately viewed as a set of black racial privileges that erodes the white American's chance for economic and educational advancement?

The answer lies in the shrinking American economy and the globalization of its infrastructure, its employment, management and finance resources. This atrophy is compounded by the computer and automation revolutions, which have permanently dissolved many sources of employment—from pumping gas, typing and filing, warehouse and inventory, on to assembly line jobs. This economic attrition within the nation-state of the U.S. has effectively ruled out the possibility of class mobility and genuine prosperity for this generation of white Americans. For the first time in the 20th century, today's white youth will have lower incomes, economic and career prospects than their parents.

The tiny (and declining) percentage of black students and professors on college

campuses today is not responsible for this decline, nor is the thin sliver of black middle management in the private sector. Nor are the 30% unemployed black men found in every major city.

But rather than analyze this problem squarely and place the blame where it belongs—on the inhuman and unconscionable greed of huge corporations—today’s aspiring politicians, demagogues and right-wing think tanks have chosen to blame the black and minority populations of America for this decline in a shameless exercise of racist rhetoric that offers no solution to the present economic crisis. They exacerbate and heighten existing social, familial and racial tensions within this society. The bombing of the Oklahoma City Federal Building did not occur in a vacuum—it resulted from decades of white American leadership’s dereliction of duty in neglecting this country’s working classes of all complexions, in openly fomenting racism and white supremacy, in nurturing a culture of violence.

The answer to the present attacks upon affirmative action is “extend it, don’t end it.” The complex of programs developed represents a fledgling effort to correct the material effects of racism upon black Americans.

The economic deprivation of blacks has been the one constant in 375 years of American life, and its root is racism. Racism is not simply an abstract idea; it is one of the most powerful material forces in American society and it has always been perpetuated by the material and economic needs of the Euro-American state.

Unfortunately, this reality is not recognized by many folk, among them Clarence Thomas, who wrote in concurring with Justice O’Connor on *Adarand vs. Peña*, June 12, 1995:

In my mind, government-sponsored racial discrimination based on benign prejudice is just as obnoxious as discrimination inspired by malicious prejudice. In each instance, it is racial discrimination, pure and simple.

Affirmative action basically advocates the principle of a structured readjustment and redistribution of economic resources and opportunities to redress inequities among various social and ethnic groups. This is an idea well worth continuing for black Americans, and it is worth consideration by other sectors of our society as well.