

Affirmative Action Becoming Political Weapon

By Bill Hobby

"Affirmative action" seems to be a bad word these days. Its opponents say it's unfair, that it excludes the qualified in favor of the less qualified, that it is discrimination in reverse.

The complaints center around hirings, promotions, and college admissions based in part on test scores. The decisions are crucial not only to those making the decisions as well those affected by them.

Test scores and previous grades and resumes are valuable tools on which admissions committees and personnel officers must in part rely where there are hundreds or thousands of applicants of whom ten percent can be accepted. But scores and grades are not perfect predictors of performance. They are not, and should not be, the sole bases for decisions.

Some presentable young people get admitted to Yale because of their grades. Some get admitted because their daddies graduated from Yale. Some people get hired because of sterling credentials. Some get hired because their cousin, who is a senior manager, put in a good word for them. Some people get promotions because of exemplary performance, some because they play golf with the boss.

Affirmative action was intended to open the door a crack for those who might not have some of those advantages. If your parents didn't go to college, you will not be admitted as a legacy. If you are Hispanic, and the firm has no Hispanic employees, it's unlikely your cousin can put in a good word for you. If you are African-American and your boss plays golf at an all-white country club, you won't impress him on the golf course.

Employment is like most other endeavors. People tend to hire those with whom they feel comfortable, and they feel most comfortable with people just like themselves. By most standards, affirmative action hasn't been a rousing success. The so-called Glass Ceiling Commission set up by then President George Bush found that white males still held up to 97 percent of top level management jobs.

Despite aggressive affirmative action policies by many universities, minority enrollment in higher education has increased only modestly. Between 1976 and 1993, black enrollment went from 9.4 percent of all students to 9.9 percent. Hispanic enrollment increased from 3.5 percent to 6.9 percent and Asian enrollment from 1.8 percent to 5.1 percent.

Bachelors' degrees earned by minority group members were 10.3 percent of the total in 1976 and 15.6 percent in 1993. In other words, laws and strenuous efforts by universities produced a yearly increase of three tenths of one percent a year.

Affirmative action gets blamed for the problems of angry white men, but it's hardly the cause. As Peter Drucker wrote in an article called *The Age of Social Transformation*, "No class in history has ever risen faster than the blue-collar worker. And no class in history has ever fallen faster."

Between 1950, when blue-collar workers were at their zenith in numbers and earning power, and 1990, high earning industrial workers were displaced by a new breed of high-earning employee--the technologist or the knowledge worker. Technology and economics

caused the jobs to change.

It wasn't caused by affirmative action. In fact, the job shift aggravated what Drucker calls "America's oldest and least tractable problem: the position of blacks". The fall of the industrial worker hit African-Americans disproportionately hard.

But job insecurity is a relatively recent phenomenon for many white men. As President Clinton said in Sacramento recently, "They've been working for 15 years without a raise and they think they could be fired at any time."

Their anger is aimed at the wrong target. Affirmative action, where practiced in good faith by government, universities and well-meaning businesses, has had modest success in offering opportunity to minorities. A great many well-qualified women, African, Hispanic, Native and Asian Americans probably owe their positions to affirmative action. We hope they are hiring and promoting more people like themselves. Until there are enough minorities in decision-making positions, the playing field will not be level.

Where there is honest-to-goodness reverse discrimination, there is a remedy in the courts. Department of Labor figures indicate it occurs less often than we think--only 100 of more than 3,000 federal court decisions on discrimination cases involved reverse bias, and most of those cases were found to be without merit.

It seems more likely that affirmative action has become a political weapon, to be used to divide us along racial lines and dismantle what progress we have made toward equal opportunity.

Originally published May 18, 1995, in the Houston Chronicle.