

MEMORANDUM

TO: TOM FREEDMAN, MARY L. SMITH

FROM: DREW HANSEN

RE: THREE VIEWS ON AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

DATE: AUGUST 8, 1997

SUMMARY

In recent years, three ways to “mend” affirmative action have been suggested. All Republicans favor dismantling affirmative action, and some favor replacing affirmative action programs with training for minority applicants and with programs to empower urban communities. The PPI supports phasing out mandatory government affirmative action programs and replacing them with voluntary employer-created programs and with empowerment programs for urban communities. The PPI believes that college admissions should be based on need as well as race, and that colleges should promote intensive preparation programs for minority entrants. William Julius Wilson advocates a policy of “affirmative opportunity” that would combine race-based programs to enhance opportunity with the use of flexible criteria in hiring and educational decisions and the implementation of programs to benefit all poor Americans.

1. Republicans

Republican groups charge that affirmative action programs are an immoral violation of the liberal principle of individual rights and that they increase racial tension in America. They support the abolition of most federal affirmative action programs. There is some Republican support for replacing affirmative action with programs that prepare minorities for selected jobs or educational opportunities and with programs aimed at revitalizing the inner cities.

The **Heritage Foundation** believes that three principles should form the foundation of affirmative action policy: the federal government should not favor one group over another, Congress should clarify what it means by “discrimination” (and eliminate definitions that are based on historical injustice or on statistical criteria), and recapture the philosophical spirit of the civil rights movement (which Heritage thinks is “color-blindness”).¹ **Empower America** has a similar view, joining Heritage in support of the California Civil Rights Initiative and the Dole-Canaday Equal Opportunity Act of 1995².

¹Michael G. Franc, “Federal Race and Sex-based Preferences,” in *Issues '96: The Candidate's Briefing Book* (Heritage Foundation, 1996).

²Empower America Issue Briefing, “Affirmative Action.”

Both Heritage and Empower America advocate programs to replace the current system of affirmative action. Heritage supports the model of the **U.S. military**, which eliminates promotion quotas and timetables and instead concentrates on aggressive preparation of minority recruits. Empower America supports **programs to reach out to the inner cities**, such as tenant management of public housing, empowerment zones, and the development of capital, savings, and credit in the minority community. **Speaker Gingrich** has also said, "I'd rather talk about how do we replace group affirmative action with effective help for individuals, rather than just talk about wiping out affirmative action by itself."³

2. DLC-PPI

The **Progressive Policy Institute** has called for a "new bargain" on affirmative action, based on three principles.⁴ First, the government should **phase out mandatory preferences in government and reinforce voluntary affirmative action by private employers**. The government could reinforce voluntary programs by increasing funding for the EEOC while prohibiting the EEOC from using statistical measures of discrimination and by providing grants to community groups to conduct "employment and housing audits" (pioneered by the Urban Institute) to reveal discrimination.

Second, the government should **replace government preferences with new programs to empower individuals and communities**. Many of the PPI's proposed programs are identical to those proposed by Empower America: the creation of Individual Development Accounts (IDAs) for asset-building among low income people, the encouragement of home ownership in low-income areas, and the expansion of charter schools.

Third, the United States should **base affirmative action in college admissions on need rather than race, and lift students rather than lowering standards**. Like the Heritage Foundation, the PPI points to the **U.S. military** model of goals for minority promotion and rigorous training programs for summer recruits. Similar programs exist at the college level: a Boston College six-week training program for affirmative action entrants has raised their four-year graduation rate to 95% (as opposed to 88% for the college as a whole).

3. William Julius Wilson

Harvard sociologist **William Julius Wilson** has called for a program of "**affirmative opportunity**" to replace the current system of affirmative action.⁵ Public opinion polls, says

³Cited in Will Marshall, "From Preferences to Empowerment: A New Bargain on Affirmative Action," (Progressive Policy Institute, 1995).

⁴Marshall, 1995.

⁵William Julius Wilson, "The New Social Inequality and Affirmative Opportunity," in *The New Majority: Toward a Popular Progressive Politics*, ed. Stanley B. Greenberg and Theda Skocpol (New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming).

Wilson, consistently show opposition to “preferential” race-based policies (such as preferential college admissions or hiring procedures) but support for “compensatory” race-based policies (such as targeted job training or special education). The public supports “opportunity-enhancing” policies because these policies do not challenge the values of individualism and the work ethic.

Wilson proposes a three-pronged “affirmative opportunity” strategy. First, he proposes the promotion of **opportunity-enhancing** affirmative programs based on race, such as race-targeted early education programs or job training. Second, he suggests the use of **flexible criteria** in admissions and hiring decisions. These decisions, he says, should be based on criteria such as leadership, reliability, and motivation instead of solely on numerical scores. Third, he advocates programs that target **both need and race**, such as expanded child care and health insurance for low-wage workers.

CONCLUSION

These three views on affirmative action have several significant points of agreement: 1.) the current system of federal race-based preferences should be reformed, 2.) the U.S. military is a good model for affirmative action programs, and 3.) affirmative action programs should aim to enhance opportunity, not redress discrimination.