

### Jerry Watts

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**S**ome wise American once argued that our laws protecting freedom of speech do not extend to the individual who falsely yells “fire” in a crowded theater. Likewise, freedom of speech should not allow a group of black faculty members to yell “affirmative action” in a crowded, predominantly white, college faculty meeting. All hell might break loose.

The phrase “affirmative action” no longer refers to a specific public policy. Instead, it has become a proxy for the “race issue.” Despite data showing that white women have been the primary beneficiaries of affirmative action, the controversy that surrounds it has everything to do with the conflict between white and black Americans. Depending on the context, the mention of affirmative action can spark discussions of black genetic inferiority, black criminals, the breakdown in the delivery of services (both private and public), reverse discrimination, and even reverse racism.

When *Washington Post* reporter Janet Cooke lost her Pulitzer Prize, and her job, after her series of articles about a young black heroin addict was exposed as a fabrication, some argued that the root cause of her unprincipled behavior was affirmative action. According to this argument, Cooke was hired for a job that was beyond her qualifications, and therefore was “pressured” into writing deceitful articles. Qualified *Post* reporters, presumably, were capable of finding stories that were not only sensational but true. The important point here is that Cooke’s racial identity became the focus of attention.

Because the term “affirmative action” is rarely taken to refer to a specific policy, defenders of the actual policy are at a disadvantage. I have often been caught in debates on affirmative action that turned out to be no more than pretexts for venting opinions about blacks. On one occasion it dawned on me that my opponent was really commenting on the supposed moral demise of a once-Christian America (affirmative action evidently made people yearn to step outside of their “natural” and God-

given status—and thus represented too much of a concern for mammon).

It does not surprise me that many white Americans whose standard of living is declining choose to blame their plight on the “unqualified Negroes” who were unfairly given the jobs that should have gone to them. But I don’t know what white Californians will think when they wake up to the same declining paychecks after affirmative action is abolished.

Of course, if every Negro actually received the “affirmative action” jobs attributed to them by disgruntled whites, black America would be prospering. As an advocate of affirmative action, I find myself in a discussion that erroneously assumes that the policy has been conscientiously instituted. While Pete Wilson and others claim that we have gone too far, I’m still waiting for the policy to be applied. I am caught defending a status quo that I believe is quite obscene. But publicly to call affirmative action a cruel hoax—of rhetoric over substance—would only help to those who want to rid this country of even the rhetoric of racial justice.

In some respects, affirmative action attempted to reduce the pariah status of blacks by diffusing them in greater numbers in professional occupations and high-skilled jobs. Supposedly, through seeing blacks in these positions, whites would recognize that blacks are ordinary people. Now certainly this has happened to some extent. Yet it has become increasingly clear that racial marginalization is more resilient than many of us had believed. The increasing presence of blacks throughout the class structure has not changed the status of blacks as outsiders. In fact, I have been shocked by the apparent potency of resurgent racial appeals in this Republican Congress.

All too often, the racial identity of blacks is a focal point for white attention, particularly when a white person has been, or believes he has been, victimized by some bureaucracy. The white scholar who applies for an academic job will most likely accept being passed over if the

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job goes to another white person. But if it goes to a black person, the assumption is easily made that he or she got the job for reasons other than merit.

Take the case of my white Harvard college buddy who graduated Phi Beta Kappa but did not get into Harvard Law School. He was devastated. His explanation was—surprise!—affirmative action. I was angered, torn, perplexed by his response. Though I supported affirmative action, the fact that I could put faces on the individuals concerned (including some black Harvard College peers who were admitted to the law school with lower grade point averages (GPAs) than my friend) only increased my anxiety. I made an appointment with a Harvard Law School admissions dean and spoke to him about the plight of my white buddy. This dean gave me the usual spiel about well-rounded candidates (my buddy was a bookworm) and racial diversity and so forth. Then he mentioned that about 60 percent of the white students admitted to Harvard Law that year had lower GPAs than my friend. “Why,” he said, “don’t you ask about them?”

The democratic left has to figure out how to address the deeply embedded racism in large sectors of the white American populace. There is a

lingering escapist tendency in some white leftists, a tendency to believe that the white working and middle classes that blame affirmative action for their problems are not suffering from racial parochialism. Instead, the argument is made that these are decent whites who are merely upset by their individual confrontations with the unjust procedures of affirmative action. Surely there are such people. And because racism need not dominate one’s entire being, many decent people can be found among the ranks of the racist. But the tendency of some within the democratic left to downplay the pervasiveness of racism is morally disappointing and often cowardly.

The United States is a deeply racist country, not only in its enduring historical legacies but in the ordinary, everyday lack of concern that so many white Americans feel for the plight of poor blacks. The utter devastation that takes place on a daily basis in black urban areas could not be tolerated if white Americans viewed blacks as fellow citizens or even as fully equal human beings. Black America lies outside of the scope of white moral empathy—and this is true not only of the black urban poor. For instance, it is common for white suburbanites to try to minimize the black presence in neighboring housing (and this for the black bourgeoisie!). Any serious discussion of affirmative action must be situated within this despairing realization of American racial realities. After all, what makes affirmative action appear so problematic to many whites is that the beneficiaries are imagined as “others.” Whites are willing to make sacrifices to benefit “themselves”—that is, other whites. Until white Americans recognize the depth of our racial crisis, our national conversation about affirmative action will be evasive and inadequate. □

### AFFIRMATIVE ACTION: LEFT PERSPECTIVES

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