

Affirmative Action for Whites

Question: What's the difference between ignorance and apathy?

Answer: I don't know and I don't care!

I've posted several essays on white privilege recently, and the events in Baltimore have highlighted the issue — once again. Writers like me feel that we have to keep speaking out about it for just that reason. The media take notice of the vast suffering in the country only when people of color display their anger, when they insist that white America cannot ignore the racism that still dominates most of our domestic political issues. Indeed, it remains one of the most fundamental aspects of privilege — the privilege to ignore, the privilege to remain innocent.

One aspect of the race issue that conservatives (with the help of many liberals such as Bill Clinton) have allowed us to ignore in recent years is Affirmative Action, the notion that the nation owes extra help to minorities because of its history of discrimination. I don't want to restart that argument here because I'm talking about privilege, and how the nation established privilege in law from the very beginning. In other words, I'm talking about America's long history of Affirmative Action *for whites*.

Here are ten periods when government extended those privileges:

1 — 1670-1690: Virginia codified its bondage system. It replaced the terms “Christian” or “free” with “white,” gave new privileges to Caucasians, *removed* rights from even *free* blacks and banned interracial marriage. Other laws contributed to what Theodore Allen calls the “absolutely unique American form of male supremacism” — the right of any Euro-American to rape any African-American without fear of reprisal. Other states, including several northern states, copied these laws.

2 — 1790: The Naturalization Act allowed virtually any European immigrant to become a citizen, while denying the privilege to Asians. Over the next 120 years Congress passed many other definitions of who was “us” and who wasn’t.

3 — 1835-1840: Historians consider “Jacksonian Democracy” the period when government increased political freedoms. But it did so for only for white men, while *removing* them from Native Americans. Race, rather than civilized behavior or Christian belief (both held in abundance by the Cherokees, one of the so-called “Five Civilized Tribes”), now determined citizenship. The tribes lost their land and were forced to endure the infamous Trail of Tears.

4 — 1877: The conclusion of the Civil War presented a new problem. For two hundred years in large parts of the

country whites had been literally defined as free and blacks as unfree. With emancipation, that distinction evaporated. However, with the end of Reconstruction, many states passed new laws that prevented most blacks from acquiring western land and kept them as *de facto* slaves in the south. In the southwest, similar systems targeted Latinos. *Homesteading — the ability to acquire free land — became a privilege of whiteness.*

5 — 1892: The Supreme Court’s “Separate But Equal” ruling institutionalized segregation and poor schooling for Blacks and residential privilege for whites for the next three generations.

6 — 1912: Woodrow Wilson segregated federal jobs, all of which now went to white people.

7 — 1930s: As the founders of the republic had done in 1776, Franklin Roosevelt unified northern liberals and southern conservatives. But, like them, he had to maintain silence on race, fearing that the coalition would disintegrate. Southern politicians, who had defeated over 200 anti-lynching bills, made it clear that they would support Social Security only if it *excluded* agricultural laborers and domestic servants. This compromise deliberately kept most blacks outside of the welfare state. Even in the North, black industrial workers discovered that Social Security itself was unfair, because it used monies they contributed to pay benefits disproportionately to affluent whites, who lived

longer than most blacks.

8 — 1948: The G.I. Bill financed 90% of the 13 million houses constructed in the 1950s. However, Southern senators made sure that *98% of those homes went to whites*. Of 350,000 federally subsidized homes built in Northern California between 1946 and 1960, fewer than 100 went to blacks, as did *none* of the 82,000 homes built in Levittown, New York. This eighth degree of affirmative action for whites had long-term impact. Due to home equity inflation and resulting family inheritance, as well as the exclusion from Social Security and unequal access to capital, an average black family still has *one eleventh* of the wealth of a white family, *even when they make the same income*.

9 – The 1960s: Three-fourths of the one million persons displaced from their homes by the Interstate Highway Program were black. *A fifth of all African American housing in the nation was destroyed*. The government was reducing the housing stock for blacks at the same time it was expanding it for whites. In fact, since the highway program made “white flight” easier, it can even be said that white middle-class housing access – affirmative action – was made possible *because* of the destruction of housing for African American and Latino communities.

10 – 1985-present: The War on Drugs has disenfranchised over five million people, two million of

whom are black. This simple fact has utterly determined the course of recent history. The more African-Americans a state contains, the more likely it is to ban felons. The average state disenfranchises 2.4 % of its voting-age population but 8.4 % of blacks. In fourteen states, the share of blacks stripped of the vote exceeds 10%, *and in five states it exceeds twenty percent.* While 75% of whites register, only 60% of blacks can. Over a dozen Republican senators owe their election to these laws. Had felons been allowed to vote in 2000, Al Gore's popular vote margin would have doubled to a million. If Florida had allowed just *ex-felons* to vote, he would have carried the state by 30,000 votes and with it the presidency. Would he have invaded Iraq and Afghanistan?

This has been a brief outline of our history of bestowing affirmative action on whites. Keep it in mind the next time some fool starts to rant about how minorities get all the breaks.