

OPINION

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Code Words Used in Affirmative Action Debate

Anti-black words and phrases infect discourse about race

BY HUGH B. PRICE

The Supreme Court's decision to consider affirmative action in higher education has produced a particular phrase I've seen in several recent news articles and opinion columns.

They've noted that "even some black people" oppose affirmative action. I expect that we'll all be reminded of that more and more in the coming months.

Yes, it is true that "some" African Americans oppose affirmative action -- especially when the concept and practice are defined in ways that imply "unqualified" blacks are getting something for nothing. But the most revealing thing about the use of this phrase is that those who put the fact forward never say what it actually means.

They can't. This is code language that implies an entire dictionary of old, negative assumptions and assertions about African Americans. As with all of the code words and phrases of bigotry, this phrase's power lies in the fact that its true meanings aren't made explicit.

Indeed, the meanings can't be explicitly stated, or else the writer's position would lose any semblance of respectability. That was the "public relations" mistake Senator Trent Lott made. Nonetheless, numerous anti-black code



Hugh B. Price

Those who use the code that "even some blacks" oppose affirmative action depend upon covering up a great many facts that surround the issue.

—Hugh B. Price, president of the National Urban League

words and phrases still infect the American discourse about race. This phrase -- "even some blacks" -- is one of them. One need only ask a series of questions to uncover the pernicious attitudes behind it.

For example, why does one never see this phrase's equivalent--"even some" Italian Americans, Jewish Americans, Asian Americans, etc.--used to define the boundaries of any other American ethnic group's views about anything or bolster or attack one side of the dispute?

Why is it used that way with African-Americans and particularly by people who will then go on to declare their preference for "color-blindness" when it comes to redressing racial wrongs of the past and the present?

Another question: Why should it be particularly noteworthy, much less a surprise, that "some" blacks oppose affirmative action?

After all, "even some blacks" opposed the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

Further, why do those who employ the phrase never cite any statistics defining African Americans' views on the issue? Part of the answer lies in the overwhelming support African Americans as a group continually express for affirmative action.

For example, a Gallup Poll conducted in May 2001 found that 57 percent of blacks thought affirmative action programs should be increased, and another 28 percent felt their current scope was just about right. In my book, that adds up to an 85-percent level of support for affirmative action. The Gallup survey found that 8 percent of African Americans thought affirmative action programs should be decreased.

The great historian Barbara W. Tuchman wrote in an essay for her 1991 book, "Practicing History: Selected Essays," words about the craft of history that are relevant here. "Leaving things out because they do not fit," she declared, "is writing fiction, not history."

Certainly, those who use the code that "even some blacks" oppose affirmative action depend upon covering up a great many facts that surround the issue. Perhaps the most revealing thing they never acknowledge is the fact that mirrors it on the other side of the color line. That is, that "even some whites," who have chosen not to deny the past and the present, or hide from the future, support affirmative action.

Hugh B. Price is president of the National Urban League, a leading civil rights organization.

They argued that the movement was fostering an attitude in blacks of seeing themselves as victims and stoking resentment among whites. Yes, these currently fashionable assertions have also been around a long time.



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Racial Bias in Death Penalty Cases

BY DAVID ELLIOT

Attorney General John Ashcroft has dramatically stepped up efforts to seek federal death sentences, and is now frequently demanding that his local prosecutors seek a death sentence when the defendant is black, Latino or Native American.

Since taking office two years ago, Ashcroft has overturned local U.S. district attorneys' decisions not to seek the death penalty 28 times. Of these 28 "overrides," two involved suspects who are white, 23 involved suspects who are black, Latino or Native American, and three involved suspects whose race could not be determined.

Ashcroft also has directed prosecutors to seek death sentences in states that do not have a death penalty. Last year, a death sentence was handed down in Michigan, which has not had a death penalty in 150 years.

In addition, officials currently are seeking death sentences in Massachusetts, Vermont and Washington, D.C. and have contemplated seeking death sentences in Rhode Island, Hawaii and Puerto Rico. Not one of these jurisdictions has a state death penalty.

Since 1976, when executions were allowed to resume in the United States, the death penalty largely has been a province of the states.

Of the approximately 3,500 people currently under sentence of death, only 33 are on federal and military death rows, with the remainder residing on state death rows. Of the 831 people executed since 1976, 829 were executed by the states and two by the federal government.

David Elliot is communications director for the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty.

Letter to the Editor: Solution is Ours to Find

The failure of Ballot Measure 28 is not the end, nor a failure. It is more an opportunity, a beginning.

We need to set aside divisive arguments and acknowledge most voters want the same things.

We all agree that funding education and other vital services should be a priority. The "No" vote does not argue that. Those in opposition want our legislators to demonstrate the budget is being managed effectively and non-essential programs are being cut first.

The "Yes" vote doesn't suggest anyone wants more taxes. Those in favor simply carry an intense desire to save education and vital services for the disadvantaged and the elderly and (hopefully) want time to develop and implement a permanent, stabilized source of funding.

I firmly believe we can have both. The results of this vote should be a catalyst for us all to take part in effecting a change. Write, e-mail or call your legislators and let them know what you want. They all have a fiduciary responsibility to represent our interests, second to their individual agendas.

We cannot afford to make it "their problem." It is our problem. If we do nothing, we get what we deserve.

A solution for public education might include a repeal of Ballot Measure 5, returning control and funding to the local level. It may require a sales tax.

I know how unpopular that idea has been historically but the package has never included critical relief elements for other taxes. It should include a reduction of personal income taxes and a cap on capital gains, exempt food and medicines and require a majority vote prior to any increases.

These aren't necessarily the answers but it is painfully evident our current system is not working for us.

The time has come to have a serious discussion about viable options, convert that discussion to action items for our legislators and hold the legislators accountable for delivering results. Results we want and our children and disadvantaged citizens deserve.

Terry Shanley
Southwest Portland

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