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THE NEGATIVES ABOUT AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

If the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 meant anything, it meant a consensus of the American people that the size, power, and money of the Federal Government should be reduced. It meant that the American people had come to the conclusion that liberal "solutions" for social problems are too costly, too wasteful, too Big Brotherish, and often make the problem worse than it was in the first place.

It proved to be terribly difficult to honor this mandate. The momentum of the Great Society liberal spending programs was such that the best President Reagan could do was to slow the rate of increase, that is, cut the budget increases already authorized.

The Reagan Administration did achieve a significant reduction in the regulations imposed on our economy by the Federal bureaucracy. Although a reasonable argument could be made in favor of any one of these regulations, en masse, they represented an unacceptable money cost (ultimately borne by taxpayers and consumers) plus a cost in stifling economic growth that rendered them counterproductive.

One particular piece of officious Federal meddling now up for review is called Affirmative Action. It's known as Reverse Discrimination or Preferential Hiring as, indeed, that's what it is. It's one of many examples where a meddling bureaucracy and an activist judiciary, working in tandem, manufactured radical law out of good intentions.

In the mid-1960s, the civil rights' cry was for "equal opportunity" in hiring for all Americans. So President Lyndon Johnson issued Executive Order 11246 requiring exactly that in the Federal Government and among private companies doing business with the government.

No sooner was the ink dry on President Johnson's signature than the Department of Labor distorted his words to require and institutionalize discrimination. They wrote regulations mandating "goals," "intermediate targets," and "timetables," which are the code terms for race and sex quotas. The result was that millions of hiring decisions, instead of being "color blind," have been made based exclusively on race or sex.

This program costs the American taxpayers $47 million per year in paperwork compliance. But that's just a drop in the bucket compared to the costs imposed on private industry to comply with the complex, arbitrary regulations.

The present system mandates a numbers game in hiring and promotions. This is why personnel managers snicker and say, "I'll hire a black woman because that gives me a point in two quotas."

Reverse discrimination in jobs is like saying that we'll give each woman two votes today because, years ago, women could not vote at all. The trouble with such arbitrariness is that the two votes would go to women who have never been denied the right to vote.

Sears Roebuck Company stopped doing business with the Federal Government in 1980. Sears said it had spent tens of millions of dollars over 13 years trying to comply with Labor Department paperwork, and it just wasn't cost-effective to continue. Other businesses refuse to bid on Federal Government contracts (even though they are asked to do so), because compliance complications are too burdensome.

As Harry Truman used to say, "The buck stops here." The buck on Affirmative Action stops at Ronald Reagan. Will he sign a new version of Executive Order 11246 to ensure that hiring is non-discriminatory? Or will he continue the quota regulations which he has so often called "wrong"?

Our nation needs a new executive order that decrees fairness to all in hiring and promotions, but makes it clear that quotas cannot be used overtly or surreptitiously to subvert the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits unequal treatment based on race.

Experience teaches us that nondiscriminatory affirmative recruitment and training are more effective ways of increasing employment of underrepresented groups than discriminatory quotas. A recent public opinion survey shows that 77% of blacks oppose Affirmative Action.

President Reagan said it best when he campaigned for office in 1980: "We must not allow this noble concept of equal opportunity to be distorted into Federal guidelines or quotas which require race, ethnicity, or sex -- rather than ability and qualifications -- to be the principal factor in hiring or education. Increasing discrimination against some people in order to reduce it against others does not end discrimination."