

Affirmative Action

Affirmative action policies were never supposed to be “fair” to everybody. They were introduced at a specific time (the 1960s) to address a specific grievance (the past 200 years of state-sanctioned racial discrimination). During this era, the gov’t determined that since people of color in America had been systematically excluded from social advantages because of categories based on race, regulations should be instituted to redress those wrongs . . . also using categories based on race, sadly. They were never supposed to be fair to white people, too. The gov’t made a calculated risk; they sacrificed a generation of “fair” institutional practice wherein white people would be disadvantaged when competing with a person of color, despite the fact that many of these people who identified as “white” might have had no personal connection with the historic wrongs that got them there. That’s what was so hilarious about that string of “reverse racism” lawsuits in the 1990s, where white students claimed that black students with worse school records were getting into universities ahead of them. Of course they were. But these young people seemed to be under the impression that our system was a meritocracy—because that’s what they’re teachers had told them it was back in state-sanctioned grade school. What the state should have taught the children of the Flower Children, though, is that the programs that were concocted in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement were not going to be able to be successful without anybody sacrificing anything. That was the price that was paid to keep urban neighborhoods from rioting. Some young white kids weren’t going to be able to go to the college of their choice, and some young white adults were not going to get that job they really wanted. But our educational system could never quite craft that message adroitly enough to prepare people for what they would see as a particularly un-American sort of disappointment.

Affirmative action suffers from the same fatal flaw that racism did: If you target an entire race of people, you’ve got to deal with the exceptions as well as the rule. Clearly, every black person who was excluded from a job or university before affirmative action wasn’t a criminal, stupid, or lazy; and every white person who was excluded from a job or university after affirmative action wasn’t part of the systematic oppression of all nonwhites. And, conversely, every black person who was helped by affirmative action did not necessarily see themselves as victims of oppression. There were plenty of black cops who were hired during that time who did not have positive impacts on the black community, but instead were harsher towards young black men to get over the stigma that they got their job because of the special favor of affirmative action. This is what family-movie icon Ice Cube was talking about in 1989’s seminal rap classic “F*ck the Police.” And what about the white cop who actually had rejected the narrative of racial supremacy, and treated black people equally, but now lost his job to the black cop who was intent on proving he wasn’t going to show favoritism? When you assume what is in people’s hearts because of the race you ascribe to them, sometimes you don’t do any favors for the rest of us.