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**Diversity and the Myth of White Privilege**

America still owes a debt to its black citizens, but government programs to help all 'people of color' are unfair. They should end.

By

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The NAACP believes the tea party is racist. The tea party believes the NAACP is racist. And Pat Buchanan got into trouble recently by pointing out that if Elena Kagan is confirmed to the Supreme Court, there will not be a single Protestant Justice, although Protestants make up half the U.S. population and dominated the court for generations.

Forty years ago, as the United States experienced the civil rights movement, the supposed monolith of White Anglo-Saxon Protestant dominance served as the whipping post for almost every debate about power and status in America. After a full generation of such debate, WASP elites have fallen by the wayside and a plethora of government-enforced diversity policies have marginalized many white workers. The time has come to cease the false arguments and allow every American the benefit of a fair chance at the future.

I have dedicated my political career to bringing fairness to America's economic system and to our work force, regardless of what people look like or where they may worship. Unfortunately, present-day diversity programs work against that notion, having expanded so far beyond their original purpose that they now favor anyone who does not happen to be white.

In an odd historical twist that all Americans see but few can understand, many programs allow recently arrived immigrants to move ahead of similarly situated whites whose families have been in the country for generations. These programs have damaged racial harmony. And the more they have grown, the less they have actually helped African-Americans, the intended beneficiaries of affirmative action as it was originally conceived.

How so?

Lyndon Johnson's initial program for affirmative action was based on the 13th Amendment and on the Civil Rights Act of 1866, which authorized the federal government to take actions in order to eliminate "the badges of slavery." Affirmative action was designed to recognize the uniquely difficult journey of African-Americans. This policy was justifiable and understandable, even to those who came from white cultural groups that had also suffered in socio-economic terms from the Civil War and its aftermath.

The injustices endured by black Americans at the hands of their own government have no parallel in our history, not only during the period of slavery but also in the Jim Crow era that followed. But the extrapolation of this logic to all "people of color"—especially since 1965, when new immigration laws dramatically altered the demographic makeup of the U.S.—moved affirmative action away from remediation and toward discrimination, this time against whites. It has also lessened the focus on assisting African-Americans, who despite a veneer of successful people at the very top still experience high rates of poverty, drug abuse, incarceration and family breakup.

Those who came to this country in recent decades from Asia, Latin America and Africa did not suffer discrimination from our government, and in fact have frequently been the beneficiaries of special government programs. The same cannot be said of many hard-working white Americans, including those whose roots in America go back more than 200 years.

Contrary to assumptions in the law, white America is hardly a monolith. And the journey of white American cultures is so diverse (yes) that one strains to find the logic that could lump them together for the purpose of public policy.

The clearest example of today's misguided policies comes from examining the history of the American South.

The old South was a three-tiered society, with blacks and hard-put whites both dominated by white elites who manipulated racial tensions in order to retain power. At the height of slavery, in 1860, less than 5% of whites in the South owned slaves. The eminent black historian John Hope Franklin wrote that "fully three-fourths of the white people in the South had neither slaves nor an immediate economic interest in the maintenance of slavery."

The Civil War devastated the South, in human and economic terms. And from post-Civil War Reconstruction to the beginning of World War II, the region was a ravaged place, affecting black and white alike.

In 1938, President Franklin Roosevelt created a national commission to study what he termed "the long and ironic history of the despoiling of this truly American section." At that time, most industries in the South were owned by companies outside the region. Of the South's 1.8 million sharecroppers, 1.2 million were white (a mirror of the population, which was 71% white). The illiteracy rate was five times that of the North-Central states and more than twice that of New England and the Middle Atlantic (despite the waves of European immigrants then flowing to those regions). The total endowments of all the colleges and universities in the South were less than the endowments of Harvard and Yale alone. The average schoolchild in the South had $25 a year spent on his or her education, compared to $141 for children in New York.

Generations of such deficiencies do not disappear overnight, and they affect the momentum of a culture. In 1974, a National Opinion Research Center (NORC) study of white ethnic groups showed that white Baptists nationwide averaged only 10.7 years of education, a level almost identical to blacks' average of 10.6 years, and well below that of most other white groups. A recent NORC Social Survey of white adults born after World War II showed that in the years 1980-2000, only 18.4% of white Baptists and 21.8% of Irish Protestants—the principal ethnic group that settled the South—had obtained college degrees, compared to a national average of 30.1%, a Jewish average of 73.3%, and an average among those of Chinese and Indian descent of 61.9%.

Policy makers ignored such disparities within America's white cultures when, in advancing minority diversity programs, they treated whites as a fungible monolith. Also lost on these policy makers were the differences in economic and educational attainment among nonwhite cultures. Thus nonwhite groups received special consideration in a wide variety of areas including business startups, academic admissions, job promotions and lucrative government contracts.

Where should we go from here? Beyond our continuing obligation to assist those African-Americans still in need, government-directed diversity programs should end.

Nondiscrimination laws should be applied equally among all citizens, including those who happen to be white. The need for inclusiveness in our society is undeniable and irreversible, both in our markets and in our communities. Our government should be in the business of enabling opportunity for all, not in picking winners. It can do so by ensuring that artificial distinctions such as race do not determine outcomes.

Memo to my fellow politicians: Drop the Procrustean policies and allow harmony to invade the public mindset. Fairness will happen, and bitterness will fade away.

Mr. Webb, a Democrat, is a U.S. senator from Virginia.