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Affirmative Action: Problems and Prospects

Cover Page Footnote

From a speech by Mr. Farmer at the University of Massachusetts at Boston on March 5, 1986, in the William Monroe Trotter Institute Distinguished Lecture Series on affirmative action.

Affirmative Action: Problems and Prospects

by
James Farmer



We live in complicated times today, and one of the sparks that flies off from such complicated times involving difficult issues is that words have all kinds of meanings, and they tend to confuse. I was astonished to hear our president, Ronald Reagan, say that if Dr. King were alive he would agree with him in opposing affirmative action, because King was color-blind and so is Ronald Reagan. This was a stopper, really, a real stopper. It reminded me of the lady who had inherited several million dollars, and because of her good fortune, she quickly engaged a historian to do the story of her family tree. The historian went right to work, did his research, returned shortly to the woman and said, "Lady, I have some bad news for you. I have run into complications. I have discovered that one of your grandfathers was electrocuted at Sing-Sing." She said, "Oh, that's horrible, but you are a historian; you're a scholar. Just cover that up—you know—conceal it so that it cannot be recognized by the reader. So the good doctor went back to his study for further labor. A week later he returned to the woman and read her the following paragraph concerning her errant grandfather: "One of her grandfathers occupied the chair of applied electricity at one of America's well-known institutions. He was very much attached to that position and he died in the harness."

Well, I usually run into that kind of confusion over words. Affirmative action has had an interesting history. I, with no attempted modesty, claim to have proposed the idea to Lyndon Johnson, in either late 1962 or early 1963, when he was Vice President. (The only person I know of who would disagree with me on that is the late Whitney Young, and he is not present to voice his disagreement now). When I reported to the Council on United Civil Rights Leadership, that group that was called the "Big Six" or the "Big Four" by the media, that I had had such a meeting with Vice President Lyndon Johnson and had proposed this idea, to which he gave the name "affirmative action," Whitney said, "Well, I discussed the same idea with Jack Kennedy." So perhaps we, in contemplating the same set of facts, had reached the same conclusion

that something new was needed to deal with the terrible job situation that minorities found themselves in. We were making progress, it is true. Blacks were getting better jobs; black income was increasing but that was in absolute terms, not in relative terms. We were not closing the gap. As we (blacks) rose, the majority rose faster; the gap widened, and so we had to do something else. Well, that was one indication of the complex days in which we were entering then.

The simple days were in the early '60's, when the issues were hot dogs at the lunch counter, cups of coffee, front seats of the bus, being able to check into a hotel, eat in a fancy restaurant in Birmingham, Jackson, Montgomery or New Orleans. That was so simple. It separated the sheep from the goats, good from evil, right from wrong. When those four black college freshmen from North Carolina A & T College sat in at the lunch counter at Woolworth in Greensboro February 1, 1960, and asked for coffee, it was very simple. Anybody with any decency, any place in the world, would have argued that of course they should have that coffee if they had the money to pay for it. They were not dirty; they were not drunk; they were not boisterous; they were not creating any disturbance whatsoever. Anybody who said that they should not have been served the coffee had to be a racist. This separated good from evil, separated right from wrong—it was so simple in those days. And furthermore, you could tell at that time when you were winning a battle: if they got the coffee, they had won; if they did not get the coffee, then victory had at least been deferred if not completely lost.

The same was true with the front seat of the bus. If they sat on the front seat of the bus and were not brutalized or savaged, were not jailed or thrown off, then they had won, and anybody of any decency would have agreed that they should have been allowed to sit wherever they wanted to sit. They had paid the same fare that other passengers had paid, and if the bus was going where they had intended to go, and they were creating no disturbance, then they should sit where they wished on a first-come first-served basis. So that was simple. If they sat there, they had won.

That's the way it was in the '60's.

Sometimes you become nostalgic for the simplicity of that time and when the youths of that day were shouting our slogan—ah, how well you must remember it: “Freedom now!” The youths believed that freedom would come by Monday morning if they did certain things: if they went to jail, if they blocked bulldozers or climbed cranes; if their heads were battered in the South, then somehow by mystic means, freedom would come. Those were the simple days, and we kind of looked for simple answers.

Well, we expected answers that were far too simple; they turned out not to be that simple. We won the victories, the short-term victories we sought. We got the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and we got the Voting Rights Act of 1965. But before those victories came, many of us realized that they were short term, not long term, and that the time would come when many of our folk would have the right to sit on the front seat of the bus or buy a hot dog at a lunch counter but would not be able to pay for it or buy the ticket, and that would turn out to be a dirt victory!

So in the meeting with Johnson (he was Vice President and Chairman of President Kennedy's Commission on Equal Employment Opportunity), which a committee of the Congress of Racial Equality had requested, I told the Vice President that we had been studying statistics which showed that while we were moving ahead in some senses—and blacks were getting better jobs, getting promoted, being hired into some non-traditional jobs in small numbers, smaller than we had hoped for—we were not closing the gap. The income gap remained as large, and indeed was widening a bit. And he said, “Yes, I've seen the same statistics; I am just as upset about them as you are, but what do you suggest we do?”

Well, we in CORE had discussed it at some length. We had had what we called bull-sessions about it and had come up with an idea; the idea was suggested by one of my staff, and not by me. He suggested that the back wheels of the car are not going to catch the front wheels of the car as long as they are moving at the same rate of speed. So those back wheels somehow have got to be speeded up if they are going to catch the front wheels of the car. As long as minorities—black people particularly—and that was the major concern at that time, (our sights broadened later on as we went along), but as long as blacks were the built-in rear wheels of the car, we would continue to be a gap behind others. And so, what we had to do was to speed up the progress of the rear wheels.

I said to Johnson that the concept is not really different from the concept of veterans preference. The idea here is that when those young men go into the armed services, they have been outside of the economic mainstream of the nation's life for whatever period of time, a year, two years, three years; so upon reentering civilian life they are at a disadvantage. We have to give them a shove to help them back into the mainstream, to help them catch up. Therefore, veterans receive preference in civil service exams and other things: if you are a veteran then you get higher on that list. And I said blacks have been out of the mainstream forever; they had never been in it. So we need an even bigger boost to get us into that mainstream which

we had never yet experienced. He nodded his head and narrowed his eyes, so I went on to say what we are proposing is something that we call—this is a terrible term, “compensatory preferential treatment.” Johnson winced. He said, “great idea because we got to do something like that.”

Then he used another analogy. He said, “If two men are running a race and one of them has a ball and chain right around his ankle, and he is there at the starting line fussing with that ball and chain while his opponent is half way around the track running like mad, you can't cut those chains off and say, ‘now you're free, you're free and equal, run the race.’ That's not fair,” said Johnson. “That's not fair; the other man's half way around the track. Somehow we got to start them at the same place or get this fellow up where he can catch up with the other man, then say run the race as equals.” He said, “But don't call it . . . what did you call it? Compensatory what?” And he said, “Oh, that's awful; that's calculated to raise a hackle on everybody—get everybody mad at you.” He said, “No, what you're going to call it—let's see—we got to move forward, we got to move forthrightly, be positive about it, move positively, move affirmatively . . . yes, that's it—‘Affirmative Action’!”

Well, he made a speech at Howard University using his analogy of the runners. Affirmative action became official policy of the Federal Government. Then shortly after that, they told a story about President Kennedy stepping off a plane one day, looking at the Honor Guard there to meet him, and observing that there were no blacks there. He called the officer over and commented on that fact. The officer smiled and said, “That's correct, Mr. President; you see, none have applied.” The President said “Well go out and find some.” That was affirmative action. That flew in the face of the old concept of color-blindness. What we had been saying to employers and to other decision makers in the society, including educational administrators in institutions of higher education, was “Be color-blind, be absolutely color-blind, don't see color when you see an applicant for a job or admission. Just hire the best qualified person who happens to apply for that job. That's all; that's all you need to do; you will fulfill your duty, fulfill all the requirements. And do not discriminate; do not refuse to hire or admit anybody because of his or her color.” That's all we asked of them; we asked them to be color-blind.

Well, that color-blindness really did not work. We longed for color-blindness. I remember in the early days of CORE—and there are very few people here old enough to remember 1942 when we were organizing CORE in Chicago—the white CORE members who were as dedicated as I, more dedicated if that were possible, believed passionately in color-blindness.

I remember Bernice Fisher, who was one of the founders of CORE. She was a good friend of mine. We would get together and argue and debate the ideas that went into the formation of CORE, and she talked about color-blindness. She would tell herself and tell all of us the story which everybody has heard, about the kid in first grade who came home one day—he was a white kid—and told

his mother about this wonderful new friend he had in school in the first grade. He came home the next day talking about this marvelous new friend. The mother said, "Well where does he live?" "He doesn't live around here; he doesn't live around us; he lives a long way from here." And the next day he talked about the friend again. The mother asked him rather suspiciously, "Is your friend a Negro?" The boy looked up and thought, "Gosh, I don't know, I forgot to look." He said, "I'll look tomorrow and let you know." We told ourselves that story over and over again. How Bernice laughed and how all of us laughed. We told ourselves that that's the way we were: we were color-blind; the nation was going to become color-blind; we were going to make it color-blind. And so what we were saying to employers prior to affirmative action was, "be color-blind."

Indeed, the first Fair Employment Practices legislation was color-blind legislation. There was that executive order extracted from Franklin Delano Roosevelt by the late great A. Phillip Randolph, who was, in my judgment, one of the greatest black leaders this nation has produced. (Many here who would not recognize his name, would say, "A. Phillip who?") Randolph had proposed a march on Washington way back in 1941, before Pearl Harbor. It was to take place early that year and he, in his thundering voice, held mass meetings at parks throughout the country and he packed them in. He was the premier black leader those days. Randolph said, "In my opinion discrimination in employment, in government or industry, will not cease until the President and the Congress of the United States see 5,000, 10,000, 25,000 (petitioners)." Big terms then, unprecedentedly big terms and when it caught fire, people applauded so much Randolph pursued the idea of the march in his speeches. He got the backing of the Walter White of the NAACP and Lester Granger of the Urban League, and continued to talk about it. Roosevelt was upset because America was the arsenal of democracy. We were defending democracy and freedom against tyrants, fighting against the master race theory of Adolph Hitler and against fascist Italy. And if the whole world saw 25,000 black Americans coming as close to the lawn of the White House as they could get, probably protesting discrimination in employment in defense industries as well as the government of this arsenal of democracy, how embarrassing that would be!

Roosevelt, of course, was upset. Eleanor Roosevelt made a trip to New York, met with Randolph and Walter White and Lester Granger and asked them what they wanted her to do to facilitate the matter. They wanted a meeting with the President, face to face. The meeting was set up by Eleanor. At the meeting Roosevelt said, "Gentlemen, you must not march on Washington; you cannot do it." "What, Mr. President," asked Randolph, "would you be prepared to do to persuade us to call off our plans?" "What do you wish me to do, Mr. Randolph?" "We want an executive order outlawing discrimination in employment in government and industry on grounds of race, creed, color or national origin." Said the President, "You shall have it." That was Executive Order 8802; it set up the first Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) to

oversee it.

Various states passed FEPC laws after that. They were color-blind (laws); the laws said to employers: be color-blind, be oblivious to race, to color, to nationality for anyone who applies; just hire the best qualified. Now this assumed—which we were not really conscious of at the time—a color-blind society in order for it to work. It assumed that the employer would act in good faith; it assumed, too, that blacks would apply in reasonable numbers, feeling confident that they would have the same chance as anyone else to get the job. It assumed that they would know about the job, that it would be publicized through media which reached them as well as it reached others at the time. Well, it didn't work. We'd go back to an employer after a while and say, "Now Mr. Employer, you had a year of Fair Employment Practices Commission activity, how many blacks did you hire?" His answer would be: "How the hell should I know, I'm color-blind like you told me to be." We'd take a visual check and find out he had none. He'd say, "So what, have you proved that I refused to hire somebody who was better qualified than those whom I hired. If not, you have no complaint—dry up." Obviously it wasn't working.

One other illustration. CORE in the early 1960's had a campaign against job discrimination in a chain of hamburger joints in the Bronx—White Tower or White Castles, something like that—at which the only blacks and Puerto Ricans that they employed were janitors in the janitorial service. We had investigated carefully; we tried to negotiate. They said, "we have nothing to talk about with you." So we picketed. This wasn't in Birmingham; it was in the Bronx, and we had garbage thrown at us, a cross was burned in the window. We continued picketing. We persevered.

Finally, management sat down to talk and what the manager said to me was, "Mr. Farmer, you are absolutely right. You have pointed out in your leaflets that the only blacks and Puerto Ricans in our employ are in the janitorial service. That is correct." He said, "We would like to correct it, but we can't because we project that we will have need for about 75 sales personnel within the next 60 days, (sales personnel were counter people), and we would like to hire blacks and Puerto Ricans to make up for the deficit of the present and past, but we can't do it." "Why can't you," I asked. The manager smiled and said, "Because it would be against the law. We are told by the law to be color-blind and if we get our employees from the State Employment Service and ask them to send us 75 black and Puerto Rican applicants, they will immediately charge us with violating the State Fair Employment Practices Law which says that we may not consider race or color in seeking job applicants or workers." So he smiled—rather triumphantly, I thought.

I asked for a recess and called a buddy of mine who works for the State Employment Service and said, "Jack, you realize the law is archaic." He said, "Of course, it's one of those color-blind laws that you and a lot of people like you fought so hard to get a few years ago." I explained the problem we had with this chain of hamburger joints and asked for his suggestion. He said, "Well I'll tell you

what Jim, go back into your negotiations and ask this manager to call me. Tell him don't write but call and tell me of his needs within 60 days — 75 people and he would like blacks and Puerto Ricans. Tell him to tell me that over the phone and I will then call our office on 125th Street in Harlem and ask them to send him 75 qualified applicants regardless of race, color, creed or national origin."

Well, here was a recognition that the law was outmoded — the color-blind law and our seeking to find some way around it. Well, obviously, that's not the way to operate in a society that respects law. We had to find something new. What was new, then, was affirmative action, which flew in the face of the concept of equal treatment. We were asking for something more than equal treatment for those of unequal status. Now after my meeting with Johnson, when I reported on this to the Council on United Civil Rights Leadership, there was no unanimity of approval there. Roy Wilkins, who was a good friend of mine and a man whom I respected highly, (I think he was one of the brightest of the Civil Rights Leaders), raised some questions about it. He said, "Jim, I don't think it would fly in America. I don't think it would fly because here you are moving a step beyond asking for equal treatment; you are asking for special treatment, by whatever name you call it." And he says, "Americans will buy equal treatment but will not buy special treatment." I argued that asking for equal treatment for those of unequal status would not remove the inequality. Wilkins said, "That may be true, but I am still not prepared to buy your alternative as a workable plan." There were others who disagreed later on, others whose names would be recognizable, who felt that this just would not go in America.

After it became a Federal policy, the Government began using it in its contracts with industry, requiring that industry report on the number of minorities in various job categories. If there was inequity, the industry was required to show improvement each year at the risk of possible loss of the contract. This became a policy of the Federal Government. Now it did work hardship on people. There is just no question about it, and I could understand it. I am not one of those who feels that anybody who disagrees with us on the intricacies of affirmative action is automatically, ipso facto, a racist. It is not true; things are not simple as they were in the '60's.

Affirmative action didn't work the first couple of years, by the way. We'd go back to an employer then and say: "Look, you've been practicing affirmative action for two years and that said you had to go out and seek members of minorities to fill jobs. How many minorities do you have now?" What was the answer? In more cases than not, the answer was, "Well Jim, God knows I've tried; I've tried hard but I couldn't find any that were qualified." Then we had another problem. Alright, we got affirmative action, moving a step forward, beyond equal treatment but still, this doesn't work. How are we going to prove whether this man, this woman — probably a man then because of the discrimination against women, (there were very few women who were in those decision making spots at that time). How are we going to prove that this man has tried honestly? How are we going to prove that

he has acted in good faith and could not find a qualified person?

Well, we, by "we" I mean the Movement, came up with the idea of numerical goals and timetables, some way to test a man's good faith. He says, "I've tried." We would say "Look, you've tried but you're gonna have to try harder because you have a goal here and this is a goal that you are going to have to move toward." Not a quota, we argued, because a quota is hard and fixed, inflexible; a goal is something that you move toward, must show progress toward. The supervisors, the line managers, those who hire, fire and promote, will prove their efficiency by meeting the other criteria which the company has established, and this one additional criterion: how well they have pursued the goal of the affirmative action. We are not asking, of course, that unqualified people apply or be hired. Oh, no, no, just know that they are qualified to be hired, and then hire them.

Now we are being told that yes, but affirmative action has done so much damage it has made people lazy. Well, for all of these years, white males have had affirmative action; they have had preferential treatment. I haven't noticed that it has made most of them lazy; they seem pretty aggressive and moving ahead, in spite of having had preferential treatment, having had affirmative action. I don't think affirmative action makes people lazy. It happens to have quite the opposite effect. Now it is quite possible that some persons of less than adequate qualifications have slipped through, but that's true in any system that is established. I don't know any system that is fool-proof and has not made an error. But the system itself, the affirmative action system, has been good.

But then, what about the argument of quotas? What about it? For years we fought against quotas. Quotas were used in university after university, professional school after professional school, to exclude or limit the number of various minorities: blacks, Hispanics, Jews — and we fought hard. I know. When I was living in New York City, many, many years during that period, we fought in New York State against those institutions' quotas. We fought to have those quotas removed and we won the battle. We got those quotas licked. As far as I know, they're out. They *had* quotas too. Usually they didn't deny it or couldn't deny it. They wouldn't say they had a quota against Jews; they would say they had quotas on New Yorkers because they didn't want to be swamped with people from New York, but everybody knew what they meant: they had a quota on Jews, and we fought against it.

So you see, now it's difficult for many people to see. When we turn around, the agendas have changed. Time has moved on, and in order to make additional progress, it is perceived as necessary to have something similar to quotas. In spite of the argument which I made, it's not a quota; the differences are clear; it's *similar* to quotas. Those who say it is a quota — I wouldn't argue too hard with them on it. We use something *like* quotas to make further progress. "Quotas were bad then, and they are bad now," they would argue. It is hard for some people to see that they may be useful now when they were wrong then.

They were wrong when they were used to *exclude*; now they can be used to *include* those who have been excluded.

Some great thinkers and people of warm, great, big hearts have been unable to agree with that. To name just one, the Late Justice William O. Douglas, great old war-horse with all progressive causes. But in the DeFunis case which preceded Bakke by some years, DeFunis had applied for admission to the law school at the University of Washington State and had been turned down. He took it to court. He finally got it to the Supreme Court, arguing as Bakke had that he was turned down because they had a quota for blacks, and blacks were admitted who were less qualified than he; therefore, he was discriminated against because of his color, white. When it got to the Supreme Court, DeFunis has already been admitted to law school at the University of Washington, and in fact had graduated, it took so long. So the Supreme Court was able to sidestep the substantive issue by ruling it a moot case. But Justice Douglas felt so strongly on this issue that he sat down and wrote a decision of his own, an opinion which was classic liberalism of two decades earlier, New Deal liberalism which had to view any use of quotas as wrong because it viewed the fight against quotas as a principle, not a tactic. It was a beautifully worded opinion; it would have been a classic document in my opinion had it been written two decades earlier. But written when it was, in my judgment, it was archaic and obsolete. "For time makes ancient good uncouth," to quote an old poem and a hymn.

The fight against quotas was never an absolute, never a matter of principle, but a matter of tactic. It was not a quota that was bad; it was how the quota was used. If it's used to keep people out — it's bad; if it's used to bring people in, then it is good. Yet there are so many emotions around, how can we keep it a live concept and keep it going? I raised that question a number of years ago with a group of management interns in a government department (Defense Department). These were college students. One very bright college student, a management intern at the Department Of Defense, came up with an idea. Imaginative, not without flaws but imaginative, and that's what it's going to take today, I think: compromise, dialogue, negotiation, use of imagination to find some alterations that are more widely acceptable. He said, "Just a minute Mr. Farmer, let's take the University of Washington and DeFunis." He said, "O.K., we can say that two applicants are highly qualified; A and B are highly qualified." I doubt that we can say A is more qualified than B because A scored 5 points higher than B on a test, but we can say that both are qualified; maybe B speaks better, maybe B improvises more with his clients; maybe B can wheel and deal better with the Honorable Judge in his cloak-room, but we can say that A and B are both qualified. Suppose the University of Washington Law School had had space for 100 applicants; suppose then they had selected 1,000 of the best qualified applicants during all the criteria, and then suppose they would select the 100 they needed out of that 1,000 by random selection, a lottery". He said, "Now if DeFunis were in the 1,000 and not in the 100, could he then claim discrimination in reverse? I doubt it," said this

management intern.

I thought it was a very imaginative suggestion, not without flaws, because the crux of the matter is how to select the 1,000 or what the criteria are or the assumption is. And it *is* an assumption, that if you pick 1,000 there will be representative sprinklings of minorities and of women, and so on. Maybe there won't be. We are supposing only that DeFunis is not in that thousand. But suppose no blacks are in it; then blacks couldn't claim discrimination either, could they? And we wouldn't accept that as a substitute for affirmative action. So it's not unflawed, but maybe we are going to have to sit down and work out some way that we can win back some of the allies who have been lost in the struggle.

I think the basic principle of affirmative action must not be lost. It is not true, Mr. President, Mr. Ronald Reagan, that Martin Luther King would have agreed with you that affirmative action should go, or that numerical goals and time tables, if that is what you're saying, should go. Remember that Dr. King spoke of the color-blind society where a black child and a white child hold hands, play together as brothers, and where a person would be judged not by the color of skin but by the content of character. He put that in the form of a dream, of the future, a future nation. He rocked back on his heels and said "I have a dream that one day." It was a dream of a nation to come, of a nation that we would bring about, not a nation that exists. You do not bring that dream about, you do not create equality by deceiving yourself into thinking that it is already here. In India they wrote affirmative action into their constitution in the '50's when the nation was formed after independence from Britain; This was affirmative action to help the outcasts, the untouchables, to move them up. I said, "Well, how did you come to the conclusion that that was necessary?" They said, "It's elementary, Brother Farmer, it is elementary. You do not achieve equality for those of unequal status by treating them equally. You cannot treat those of unequal status equally and hope to achieve equality of status." So true. India accepted that as a foregone conclusion, something that should not indeed be questioned. But it is being questioned here, now, and it will be questioned even more.

Frankly, I do not believe in deceiving ourselves at all. I think we would probably lose a referendum on affirmative action with numerical goals and timetables in any community in the country, and in any city in the country except the city that's predominantly black. We would win it in Washington, D.C.; we'd win it in — what's the town in Mississippi — all black? Mount Bayou. We'd win it there. I think we would lose it in Boston; we'd lose it in Chicago; we'd lose it in New York; we'd lose it in Philadelphia; we'd lose it in Atlanta; we'd lose it in Detroit. I think we'd lose it all over.

You see I've talked too long and I must bring it to a conclusion now. Remember that times have changed. They have changed for the better in many ways. We wrought significant changes in the '60's, the great Movement did. We battled down American-style apartheid and relegated it to the historical scrapheap. The 'For Colored' and 'For White' signs now crop up in museums where they should

be. But it has changed for the worse in some ways. In 1963, in the Fall—this was after the March in Washington—public opinion polls showed that more than 75 percent of the American people wanted strong, new civil rights legislation with teeth in it and wanted to see it enforced. This was white, black, north, south, east, west. They were on our side; we couldn't lose. We had to win; we had won already because we had swung public opinion to our side.

But public opinion changed. The back-lash began developing in the middle '60's. Oh, people were frightened by Black Power, talk of revolution, by publicity of inner-city crime, muggings, rapes and murders. They were frightened by political capital made of the busing issue and of the welfare chiselers issue; they were frightened by the summer riots and the riots in the wake of Dr. King's assassination. Those of lower middle classes were frightened because there was job training for unskilled blacks and Hispanics and Native Americans with modern techniques and modern equipment, and they feared they were being trained for their jobs and they thought their jobs would be in jeopardy and the gains which they had made, they thought might be lost. Those who have one foot up

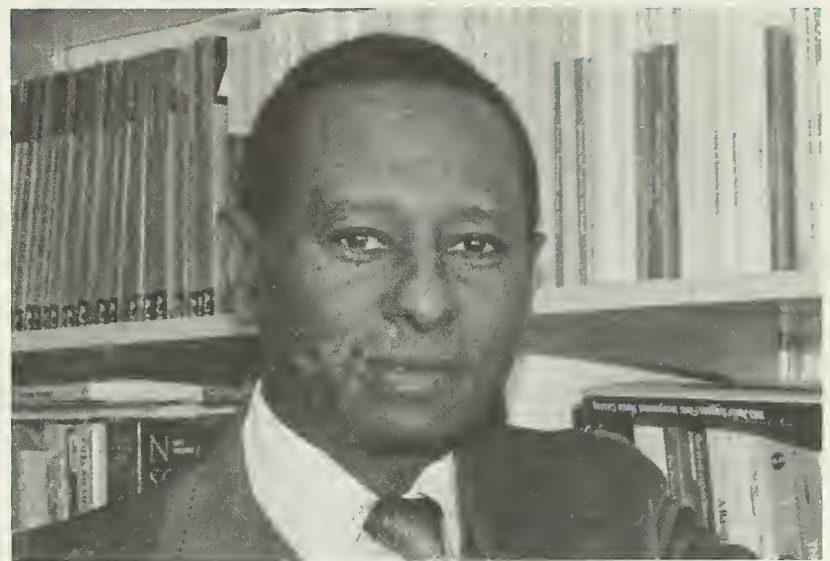
the ladder are terrified when there is motion from below them. So it changed. By the middle '70's, public opinion polls showed that the majority of the American people felt, first, that there was no longer any systemic racial discrimination except in reverse, and second, that blacks had moved too far too fast, had gotten too much too fast. In the '60's we were victims and popular. Nobody would have dared have a cocktail party without having at least one of us there. We were a very popular people then. But in the '70's and into the '80's, we were viewed more as victimizers, not as victims. We were victims before, victims of oppression—long suffering, now victimizers. We have to change that around. We are going to need the alliance, the friendship, the coalition, the help of all of those of goodwill. If I may close with the words of Hillel, a Rabbi of 2,000 years ago: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am for myself alone what am I? And if not now, when?"

From a speech by Mr. Farmer at the University of Massachusetts at Boston on March 5, 1986, in the William Monroe Trotter Institute Distinguished Lecture Series on affirmative action.

The Economic Status of Blacks in Boston

by
James E. Blackwell

In recent years, special attention has been given to problems of racism in Boston. Without question, highly publicized steps have been taken by civic, business, religious, and neighborhood groups to combat racism, bigotry and discrimination. Frequently, these initiatives have also been supported by municipal and state governments or administrations. Strategies for improving the racial climate in Boston, initiated by the Covenant for Racial Justice, the Boston Committee, the Coalition for a Better Boston, and now, the newly created PARTNERSHIP, as well as some pronouncements of the (Mayor) Flynn and (Governor) Dukakis administrations must be applauded. However, despite such courses of actions, there is convincing evidence to support the contention that the roots of racial and ethnic discrimination have not been fully addressed. Further, there exists a telling discontinuity between rhetoric and demonstrated success in alleviating the basic problems of racial discord and race-based exclusion from the social and economic infrastructure of the Boston community.



In the monograph, *The Emerging Black Community of Boston*,¹ I focused on structural barriers and conditions which either accelerate or impede access and upward mobility of blacks in the occupational structure. This work offered a description of the general economic conditions and status of blacks in Boston at mid-1985. The theoretical underpinnings of the paper were sociological, social-psychological and economic interpretations of prejudice and discrimination in the marketplace. Trend data on the character of that discrimination, the underrepresentation of blacks in public and private sector employment, poverty, unemployment, and income—all were obtained from a variety of sources. The trend data covered a period from 1979 to mid-1985. Since the publication of this document, I have examined additional data, some of which were generated by the Flynn Administration.

My conclusions remain unchanged! Despite the enormous economic boom currently experienced by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the City of Boston, and despite some improvements in their status, *blacks and*