

In Focus

Affirmative Action

Leveling the field



SONIA HOLLIMON-STOVALL is a senior broadcasting major and a *Daily Nebraskan* columnist.

"Well, I guess I can trust you, seeing as how you're colored," said the old woman being wheeled into the operating room.

"Excuse me?" asked her doctor, puzzled.

"Well, everybody knows you probably had to work four times as hard to get here as anybody else."

"Well ... thank you ... I think," responded

the doctor, amused.

Did the doctor do a good job? Or is it possible that the character "old lady going off to surgery" was wrong and her surgeon was there based solely on his skin color? Ah, but the '60s are behind us — oops, that was just last week on "Chicago Hope."

In order to understand what the old lady meant, let me explain it in Nebraska football terms: Nebraska is playing Pacific, and in order to level the playing field, Pacific has brought in Barry Sanders, Dan Marino and Jerry Rice.

Now, if that happened, the game would be a lot more interesting, wouldn't it, and then you wouldn't have to leave during halftime because you're so incredibly bored.

Unfortunately, that isn't how our founding fathers set things up. To celebrate their newfound assertion of independence and the equality of man, perhaps they chose a fine cigar — freshly rolled by one of their slaves.

If there were such a thing as equal opportunity in the United States, we could

save ourselves a lot of money and save the NAACP a lot of time.

For some, the idea of affirmative action seems outdated, after all, slavery ended, hmm, about 130 years ago. Let's see, slavery went on for about four hundred years and affirmative action has been in place for about 30 years.

Well, that sounds fair, doesn't it?

Recently, a guy told me he thought affirmative action was demeaning to women and minorities. I can't imagine why I should feel bad — but if I did, it would at least be consistent with the American agenda of blaming the victim.

Complaints that so-and-so "didn't get the job because of affirmative action" is crap. Can we whine a little more? Let's place the blame where it really belongs for once — on the shoulders of bigoted, prejudicial perspectives perpetuated by ignorant ancestors, relatives, parents and teaching methods.

Don't tell me we don't need affirmative action because things have changed and

"nobody thinks like that any more."

The definition of affirmative action — "a policy or program for correcting the effects of discrimination in the employment or education of members of certain groups, such as women, or blacks," according to the Webster's New World Dictionary.

Nowhere in the definition will you find the words "gift," "handout" or "free ride."

Affirmative action was implemented to correct an inherent flaw in our country's system of employment and education — to provide opportunities where there were none.

Is it safe to assume then, that people who are against affirmative action have found an effective way to rid themselves of all prejudice and have discovered a miracle cure for the institutional racism and lack of cultural awareness in the United States and are now prepared to step aside for someone else?

If so, well then, I don't need affirmative action to get a job — I just need to work hard to be the best and the brightest. In that case, I'm in luck — because that's what I've been doing all along.

Not a smooth move(ment)

Over the summer I did research in a lab down at the Beadle Center, and along with learning more than I ever needed to know about photosystem I, I discovered subtle resentment still exists.

I was expressing some doubt about my qualifications for admission to grad schools of repute when someone remarked that I need not worry because of my ethnicity. No thought was given to this statement until late that night when I was reading over some grad school apps. Then this person's statement came back.

Don't worry, you'll get in because you're Asian. What does that mean? Besides the obvious answer, according to this statement, admissions committees will stop at the ethnicity checklist and say, "We must accept him because he's Asian. He must have good scores, blah, blah, blah ..."

Of course that's not true — just ask my profs. But there is a preconceived notion that being a minority will place us in a separate category. What lies at the root of this problem? Affirmative action. Affirmative action is a plan designed to correct imbalances in the work force, student body, etc., that exist directly as a result of past discrimination.

Technically, a school or business doesn't have to undertake these programs, but in order to follow these guidelines, a policy of preferential treatment is adopted. A school might accept only a certain number of applicants based on the percentage of the population which is a particular color. Thus, if whites comprise 60 percent, a school might limit the number of whites in the student body to 60 percent. And therein lies the problem. In order to correct imbalances, the pendulum has swung too far the other way.

The last three decades or so has shown that affirmative action has some major problems. "Oh my," some might gasp, "you don't support affirmative action? But, but, but you're a minority!" So what? Affirmative action and being a minority have no direct correlation — if one has to support some-

thing that, in an effort to create justice, causes its own injustice.

Affirmative action is a noble idea, but has been misguided and tarnished by an uncontrolled fear of being politically incorrect. If affirmative action is ever to work, it should only be applicable at the undergraduate level. High school students are not created equal — those coming from poorer sections of the country are at a disadvantage. For admission purposes at the undergraduate level, affirmative action would help.

But once the student has progressed to some level of graduate studies or professional school or is in the work force, affirmative action should not be used. During my time here at the university, I've had the same opportunity as the thousands of other students. I certainly am on the same playing field. And once I leave this campus, I don't expect — nor do I want — to be chosen based on the color of my skin.

Likewise, affirmative action in the work force doesn't work. How do you go about legislating over businesses without impeding their growth? I'm not advocating that we allow businesses to run willy-nilly and hire whomever — ignoring diversity. But with affirmative action, we end up having programs set aside for minorities. And unfortunately this gives unscrupulous companies room to hire only whites for the rest of the positions.

Proponents of affirmative action generally contend that, first, affirmative action of the proactive sort will provide adequate compensation, and secondly, that it provides compensation better than any other alternative. Adequate compensation? For whom? Women and minorities? And are we speaking of individuals or the collective whole?

Rather than helping the whole minority population, as a government social program should, affirmative action polarizes people. Think about it for a second. Women must "jockey" for position against other disadvantaged groups for priority employment or

admissions. Not only does affirmative action do this, it pits black men against Hispanic women, Asian women against American Indian men. This Balkanization hurts the social fabric more than it helps — and it often creates a social stigma for those involved.

Two years ago, the University of California school system admitted students who were less qualified over others. (Cali is a test-bed for almost every controversy.) Black, Hispanic and American Indian applicants were given more favorable status because they were underrepresented in the university system. Whites and Asians were not. So there was a small number of black students accepted who were admittedly less qualified. The majority of blacks were qualified.

However, because of this policy, a feeling of resentment was created. Some black students said they felt that others looked at them as taking a spot from more qualified students. And these students *did* excel in high school — in mathematics, the sciences, the humanities — but were immediately lumped in with the less qualified.

Proponents of affirmative action will rebut, though, that this stigma has nothing to do with affirmative action — that it is a simple matter of prejudice. After all, it will be said, this treatment is not given for a minority's entire career — recipients of affirmative action are still expected to prove themselves. I agree wholeheartedly.

But the tacit assumption in this argument is that the ignorance of racism/sexism can be overcome. So how can affirmative action do this? That's the problem. It can't. If I gain a position because of my skin color, the racist in the school or work place will never recognize my merits. The racist will see affirmative action as letting "another one" into their system. There is no justification for employing one discriminatory act for another — and that is what this is all about. This stigmatization benefits no one.

Proponents will say we need to compen-



ANTHONY NGUYEN is a senior biochemistry and philosophy major and the *Daily Nebraskan* opinion editor.

sate for the results of past discrimination. I can't deny this country's history of racism and sexism. But is this type of "compensatory" justice really fair? Is it right to punish people for the deeds of their ancestors? Can we in goodconscience say to all white males: Forget about what you want, your ancestors were racist?

Affirmative action does not involve preferential treatment, we might claim. But doesn't it? If we are going to implement a program to correct imbalances, that means we must actively seek out people who are generally underrepresented in particular areas. Sometimes that means less qualified.

In a perfect world, we would all be colorblind. This is not a perfect world. Affirmative action may have a noble banner, but the means to that end certainly aren't justified. We don't want people to judge us on the color of our skin. So why do we judge others — through affirmative action — on the color of theirs?

We want our merits to be our ticket, not a plan that collectively categorizes us. Those who favor affirmative action must grapple with creating injustice, not only for one part of society, but for the whole.