

Victims of “Affirmative Action”: Bam, Tom, & Dubya

by Richard Kostelanetz (May 2015)

The principal problem with this short-sighted policy commonly called “Affirmative Action” is that, in the interests of equal results rather than equal opportunity, it victimizes its individual beneficiaries into thinking that they are better than they are or otherwise might be.

If we agree that Caucasian players in college basketball are disproportionately few in relation to the Caucasian representation in the general American population, then an advocate of affirmative action might propose letting all white players put springs in their shoes, enabling them to leap as high as their black colleagues, creating the precondition for more equal results in, say, the scoring or rebounding totals of white players.

However, once these white players graduated from college and tried to play in professional courts unreceptive to affirmative action—literally, level playing fields—they would discover that they could not compete as well as before. Thus were they victimized by a policy purportedly designed to benefit them.

I think of both Judge Clarence Thomas and President Barack Obama as victims of racial affirmative action which, early in their adult lives, admitted them into universities perhaps not otherwise open to them. However, once they entered level playing fields, say in a positions devoid of affirmative action, they discovered that they couldn’t work as well as their colleagues and predecessors.

For most of his early years on the Supreme Court, Thomas said nothing in their public debates and voted along with his fellow conservative Antonin Scalia. However, after a dozen years he began to assert himself independently, literally maturing into a job he was entitled to hold for life. Obama has, in my opinion, repeatedly displayed in all sorts of ways that as President he was swimming over his head. Several years down, he still is. Too bad for him that, unlike Thomas, he can’t have a dozen more years to mature.

The preferential policies implicit in “affirmative action” were scarcely a new invention in America. That principle previously favored those traditionally privileged, such as, say, WASP preppies who were likewise promoted into situations beyond their competence, only to discover

that their performance was sub par. One difference between the old preferential policies and the new is that the latter as laws could thus be enforced with legal actions. The old affirmative action depended upon customs ruthlessly enforced, say with the dismissal of institutional individuals refusing to honor them.

“Legacy” admissions policies enabled George W. Bush to go Yale University, even though his scores on aptitude tests were scarcely above average. The same principle, analagous to springs in his shoes, pushed Dubya into high institutional positions in various level playing fields. Here, in both corporate and elected offices, Dubya consistently disappointed, likewise victimized by affirmative action once favoring guys (yes, only guys) like him. As far as I can discern, the only level field on which he ever played was rugby at Yale.

In his classic worldwide critiques of preferential politics, Thomas Sowell has demonstrated that they benefit the elite of any favored group while scarcely affecting the unfortunate fate of the masses, in addition to generating unnecessary internal social conflict. True though that criticism probably is, it doesn't deal with individual effects, which I suggest, though they might bring short-term advantages, are deleterious in the end. One recurring truth is that certain high-minded social policies can have unfortunately low results. (Though libertarians like to mock do-gooding liberals on this score, consider that Milton Friedman's persuading Republicans to end the military draft made possible the wasteful American military incursions since the Vietnam War.)

The miracle is that America survived two guys who shouldn't have been President, in contrast to their two immediate predecessors. One difference between their playing field and a professional basketball court is that Dubya and Obama could hide behind their publicists and populous teammates. I shudder thinking what might have happened to Mike Tyson or, say, Jackie Robinson had they, early in their careers, been victimized by some sort of “affirmative action.”

I hesitated over publishing this short critique, not only because its conclusions seem too obvious to me, even if unfashionable, but because I suspect that someone made similar discoveries before me. If any reader has evidence of the latter, please let me know? Thanks.

P.S. Before concluding this subject, I must recall that I was once a beneficiary of affirmative action. In 1962, when I was a newly married graduate student at Columbia University, we followed the advice of other graduate students we knew in applying to reside in a low-rent New York City housing project. Quickly was our application affirmatively accepted, no doubt over another qualified candidate, because we were white while the residents of the

Grant Houses were roughly 50% black and 45% Latino, mostly at that time from Puerto Rico.

Living there was an agreeable experience, particularly thanks to modest rent, though I can think it victimized me in only one way. Whenever I read some outsider, usually identifying himself as “liberal do-gooder,” deriding project life, usually beginning with a persuasively negative appraisal of its grim architecture, I could reply, with the authority of personal experience of living inside, behind its walls, that this pundit was indeed ignorant.

Individual entries on **Richard Kostelanetz's** work in several fields appear in various editions of *Readers Guide to Twentieth-Century Writers*, *Merriam-Webster Encyclopedia of Literature*, *Contemporary Poets*, *Contemporary Novelists*, *Postmodern Fiction*, *Webster's Dictionary of American Writers*, *The HarperCollins Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*, *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, *Directory of American Scholars*, *Who's Who in America*, *Who's Who in the World*, *Who's Who in American Art*, *NNDB.com*, *Wikipedia.com*, and *Britannica.com*, among other distinguished directories. Otherwise, he survives in New York, where he was born, unemployed and thus overworked. His many books are