

# The Mother of All Racial Preferences: Reflections on Affirmative Action for White Folks

By Tim Wise

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Ask a fish what water is and you'll get no answer, and not only because fish can't speak. Even if they were capable of vocalizing a reply, they wouldn't have one for such a question. When water surrounds you every minute of the day, explaining what it is becomes impossible. It simply is. It's taken for granted.

So too with this thing we hear so much about called "racial preference." While many whites apparently are convinced that the notion originated with affirmative action programs, intended to expand opportunities for historically marginalized people of color, racial preference has actually had a long and very white history.

Affirmative action for whites was embodied in the abolition of European indentured servitude, which left black (and occasionally indigenous) slaves as the only unfree labor in the colonies that would become the U.S. Affirmative action for whites was the essence of the 1790 Naturalization Act, which allowed any European immigrant to become a full citizen, even while blacks, Asians, and American Indians could not. Affirmative action for whites was the guiding principle of segregation, Asian exclusion, and the theft of half of Mexico for the fulfillment of Manifest Destiny.

In recent history, affirmative action for whites motivated racially-restrictive housing policies that helped 15 million white families procure homes with FHA loans from the 1930s to the '60s, while people of color were mostly excluded from the same programs. In other words, on balance, white America is the biggest collective recipient of racial preference in history. Such preference has skewed our laws, shaped our public policy and helped create the glaring inequalities with which we still live.

White racial preference explains why white families, on average, have a net worth eleven times that of black families: a gap that remains substantial even when only comparing families of like size, composition, education and income status; and it also helps explain, at least in part, why a full-time black male worker in 2003 made less in real dollar terms than similar white men were earning in 1967. Such realities do not merely indicate the disadvantages faced by blacks, but indeed are evidence of the preferences afforded whites: the necessary flipside of discrimination.

Indeed, the value of preferences to whites over the years is so enormous that the current baby-boomer generation of whites is currently in the process of inheriting between \$7-10 trillion in assets from their parents and grandparents: property handed down by those who were able to accumulate assets at a time when people of color couldn't. To place this in perspective, we should note that this amount of money is more than all the outstanding mortgage debt, all the credit card debt, all the savings account assets, all the money in IRA's and 401k retirement plans, all the annual profits for U.S. manufacturers, and our entire merchandise trade deficit combined.

Yet few whites think of our position as resulting from racial preference. Indeed, we pride ourselves on our hard work and ambition, as if we invented the concepts; as if we have worked harder than the folks who were forced to pick cotton and build levees for free; harder than the Latino immigrants who spend ten hours a day in fields picking strawberries or tomatoes; harder than the (mostly) women of color who clean up messy hotel rooms, or change bedpans in hospitals, or the (mostly) men of color who collect our garbage: a crucial service without which we would face not only unpleasant smells but the spread of disease.

We strike the pose of self-sufficiency while ignoring the advantages we have been afforded in every realm of activity: housing, education, employment, criminal justice, politics and business. We ignore that at every turn, our hard work has been met with access to an opportunity structure to which millions of others have been denied similar access. Privilege, to us, is like water to the fish: invisible precisely because we cannot imagine life without it.

It is that context that best explains the duplicity of the President's critique of affirmative action at the University of Michigan, during the recent court battle over so-called "racial preferences" at that institution. President Bush, himself a lifelong recipient of affirmative action -- the kind set-aside for the rich and mediocre -- proclaimed that the school's policies were unfair. Yet in doing so he not only showed a profound ignorance of the Michigan policy, but also made clear the inability of yet another white person to grasp the magnitude of white privilege still in operation; an inability sadly ratified by the Supreme Court when it ruled in favor of the plaintiffs in the Michigan case, in June 2003.

To wit, the President, and ultimately the Supreme Court, attacked Michigan's policy of awarding twenty points (on a 150-point evaluation scale) to undergraduate applicants who were members of underrepresented minorities, which at U of M means blacks, Latinos and American Indians. To many whites such a "preference" was blatantly discriminatory. Yet what Bush and the Court failed to mention were the greater numbers of points awarded for other things, and which had the clear effect of preferencing whites to the exclusion of people of color.

For example, Michigan awarded twenty points to any student from a low-income background, regardless of race. Since those points could not be combined with those for minority status (in other words poor blacks don't get forty points), in effect this was a preference for poor whites. Then Michigan awarded sixteen points to students from the Upper Peninsula of the state: a rural and almost completely white area.

Of course both preferences were fair, based as they were on the recognition that economic status and geography (as with race) can have a profound effect on the quality of schooling that one receives, and that no one should be punished for such things that are beyond their control. But note that such preferences, though disproportionately awarded to whites, remained uncriticized throughout the litigation on this case, while preferences for people of color become the target for reactionary anger. Once again, white preference remained hidden because it wasn't called white preference, even if that was the effect.

But that's not all. Ten points were awarded under the Michigan plan to students who attended top high schools, and another eight points were given to students who took an especially demanding AP and Honors curriculum. As with points for those from the Upper Peninsula, these preferences may have been race-neutral in theory, but in practice they were anything but. Because of intense racial isolation (and Michigan's schools are the most segregated in America for blacks according to research by the Harvard Civil Rights Project), students of color will rarely attend the "best" schools, and on average, schools serving mostly black and Latino students offer only a third as many AP and honors courses as schools serving mostly whites. So even truly talented students of color would have been unable to access those extra points simply because of where they live, their economic status, and ultimately their race, which is intertwined with both.

Then up to twelve points were awarded for a student's SAT score, which is itself directly correlated with a student's socioeconomic status, which in turn is highly correlated with race in a way that favors whites and disadvantages most students of color.

Four more points were awarded to students with a parent who attended the U of M: a kind of affirmative action with which the President is intimately familiar, and which almost exclusively goes to whites.

In other words, Michigan was offering twenty "extra" points to the typical black, Latino or indigenous applicant, while offering various combinations worth up to 70 extra points for students who would almost all be white. But while the first of these were seen as examples of racial preferences, the second were not, hidden as they were behind the structure of social inequities that limit where people live, where they go to school, and the kinds of opportunities they have been afforded. White preferences, by being the result of the normal workings of a racist society, can remain out of sight and out of mind, while the power of the state is turned against the paltry preferences meant to offset them.

To recognize just how blind so many white Americans are to the workings of white privilege, one need only consider the oft-heard comment by whites that "if I had only been black I would have gotten into my first-choice college." Such a statement not only ignores the fact that whites are more likely than members of any group, even with affirmative action, to get into their first-choice school, but it also presumes, as anti-racist activist Paul Marcus explains, "that if these whites were black, everything else about their life would have remained the same: that it would have made no negative difference as to where they went to school, what their family income was, or anything else."

But this ability to believe that being black would have made no difference (other than a beneficial one when it came time for college), and that being white has made no positive difference, is rooted in privilege itself: the privilege of not having one's intelligence questioned by books like *The Bell Curve*, or one's culture attacked as dysfunctional by politicians and so-called scholars; the privilege of not having to worry about being viewed as "out of place" when driving, shopping, buying a home, or attending the University of Michigan; the privilege of not being denied an interview for a job because your name sounds "too black," as a recent job study discovered happens often to African American job-seekers.

So long as those privileges remain firmly in place and the preferential treatment that flows from those privileges continues to work to the benefit of whites, all talk of ending affirmative action is not only premature but a slap in the face to those who have fought and died for equal opportunity.