

Bob Dole



NEWS

U.S. SENATOR FOR KANSAS

FROM:

SENATE MAJORITY LEADER

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AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

STATEMENT OF SENATE MAJORITY LEADER BOB DOLE

Earlier this month, in homes, neighborhoods, and communities across the country, Americans celebrated our nation's 219th birthday.

There was, of course, much to celebrate. Over two centuries after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, America remains what she has always been--the beacon of freedom, and the last best hope for all mankind on earth.

But as we celebrate these freedoms, and commemorate those who have sacrificed so much along the way, we must also remember that American history is not always a tale of progress and dreams fulfilled.

It is a history of hope mixed with tragedy -- institutionalized slavery, a Constitution that said that African-Americans were only three-fifths human, Jim Crow and "separate but equal."

This legacy is a source of great shame for us precisely because so many of these outrages contradicted one of the founding principles of our Republic--that all men are created equal and that we are all endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights, including the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Evils of Discrimination & Racism Still Persist

And, today, in the America of 1995, the evils of discrimination and racism persist. They may not be as blatant as they once were. They may not be as fashionable. But they are out there, lurking in the corners, poisoning young minds, and yes, harming real people in the process.

Over the years, Americans of goodwill have tried to make a difference. We have enacted an array of anti-discrimination laws. And in the 1960s and the early 1970s, the concept of "affirmative action" was born, the product of a heartfelt desire to rectify past injustices and expand opportunity for all Americans. Many Republicans, acting with the best of intentions, were directly involved in this effort. I, for one, not only supported the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, but have also endorsed certain race- and gender-conscious steps to remedy the lingering effects of historic discrimination. That's my record, and I am proud of it.

Don't Fight Discrimination With More Discrimination

Few of us, however, believed that these policies would become a seemingly permanent fixture of our society...but that is exactly what they have become today.

During the past thirty years, we have seen the policies of preference grow...and grow...and grow some more, pitting American against American...group against group...in a bitter competition for a piece of the government pie.

Somehow, somewhere along the way, fighting discrimination has become an easy excuse to abandon the color-blind ideal. Too often today, the laudable goal of expanding opportunity is used by the federal government to justify dividing Americans. That's wrong, and it ought to stop.

You don't cure the evil of discrimination with more discrimination.

The President's Review

President Clinton had the opportunity today to stand up for principle by stating--in the clearest possible terms--that it is wrong for the federal government to discriminate against its citizens on the basis of race, color, ethnic background, or gender.

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Without hesitation or ambiguity, he could have said "yes" to individual rights, and "no" to group rights... "Yes" to the principle of equal opportunity and "no" to the perversion of this principle with the divisive policies of preference.

Instead of clarity, the President has chosen confusion. He has chosen to complicate an uncomplicated issue with an avalanche of words and fine distinctions.

This is not a difficult issue: discrimination is wrong. And preferential treatment is wrong, too. Our government in Washington should unite the American people, not divide us. It should guarantee equal opportunity, not divide Americans through the use of quotas, set-asides, numerical objectives, and other preferences. And that's why I will introduce legislation next week that is designed to get the federal government out of the group-preference business.

The President says he is against quotas... when quotas are only a small part of the entire regime of preferences. It is not enough to oppose "quotas," as if the label is what's offensive. It is the practice of dividing Americans through any form of preferential treatment that is objectionable.

The President also denounces preferences for "unqualified" individuals, when the real issue here is not preferences for the unqualified, which virtually every American opposes, but preferences for the "less qualified" over those who are "more qualified." This distinction is critical... but it is one the President conveniently ignores.

Leadership is about making the tough choices. It's about staking out a clear and crisp principle and holding firm to it. And, yes, leadership can sometimes mean putting a little distance between yourself and your political allies.

Regrettably, the President is trying to have it both ways.

Civil Rights Agenda For the 1990's

Two years ago, I convened a meeting in my office with a distinguished group of African-American leaders with the goal of developing a civil rights agenda for the 1990s... one that is relevant to the needs and challenges of our time.

A relevant civil rights agenda means enforcing the antidiscrimination laws that are already on the books.

It means removing regulatory barriers to economic opportunity, including the repeal of the discriminatory Davis-Bacon Act. It means school choice for low-income, inner-city families. It means meaningful welfare reform that will transform lives of dependence to ones of independence. And it means making our streets safer and renewing the war on drugs. After all, our first civil right is freedom from the fear of crime.

This is the real civil rights agenda of our time. Not preferences. Not set-asides. Not quotas. But the dreams that are built on real opportunity.

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* Remarks delivered on Senate floor, approximately 12:35 p.m.