

IMPRIMIS

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Back to Equality

*Ward Connerly
Founder and Chairman
American Civil Rights Institute*

Ward Connerly is president and chief executive officer of Connerly and Associates, a Sacramento-based land use planning and association management consulting firm. He is also founder and chairman of the American Civil Rights Institute, a

member of the board of directors of the California Chamber of Commerce, and chairman of the California Governors Foundation.

Mr. Connerly was appointed to a 12-year term on the board of regents of the University of California in 1993. He led the successful effort in 1995 to eliminate the consid-

eration of race, gender, and ethnic origin in the admissions, contracting and employment activities of the University.

In 1996, he served as statewide chairman of the California Civil Rights Initiative (CCRI). In one of the biggest news stories of the decade, the initiative was overwhelmingly approved by voters. ♣



Ward Connerly reminds us that the civil rights movement really began in 1776. Fulfilling the promise of equality found in the Declaration of Independence, not institutionalizing racial and gender preferences, should be our goal. Mr. Connerly was a speaker at Hillsdale's Shavano Institute for National Leadership 15th anniversary program in Colorado Springs in October 1997.

I am often asked why I chose to get involved with the California Civil Rights Initiative (CCRI), a recent statewide ballot measure to prohibit racial and gender discrimination and preferences that was popularly known as "Prop. 209." As a member of the board of regents at the University of California, I had already been exposed to great abuse for the reforms I advocated. I had been called a "sellout," a "house slave," an "Uncle Tom." My family, friends, and colleagues had also suffered. Why on earth did I want to invite more abuse?

The answer was simple: I had seen the ugly face of discrimination "up close and personal."

Over 50 years ago, my aunt, uncle, and I left Louisiana on a trip to the state of Washington. Along the way, we stopped at a full-service gas station. (Remember such relics of a bygone era? They preceded what I now like to call "fuel empowerment centers," where the customers have to do everything for themselves.)

The white attendant who manned the pump looked with disdain at my uncle and asked, "What do you want, boy?"

My uncle chose his own words very carefully, "Fill her up, please, sir."

A few miles down the road, we stopped to relieve ourselves in a farm field; we knew without being told that we were forbidden to use the restrooms at the station. Later that afternoon, we stopped again, this time at a roadside cafe. My aunt entered through the side door. You see, she was fair-skinned with freckles, so she could “pass.” She looked to see which sign hung on the wall: “We do not serve coloreds,” or “We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone.” The second sign allowed us a chance of getting a hot meal; if the place was empty, the waitress might be willing to serve us.

The New Discrimination

With scores of painful childhood memories like these, I was surprised and overjoyed when the Civil Rights Act of 1964 passed and the age of Jim Crow finally ended. Within a decade, however, the term “civil rights” came to signify special political and economic rights for women, blacks, and Hispanics, who were regarded as helpless victims of white male oppressors. There were militant demonstrations in the name of “women’s rights,” “black rights,” “Latino rights,” and the like. In 1993, Harvard University Professor Cornel West wrote *Race Matters*, an influential history of the modern civil rights movement that summed up the idea behind the new discrimination: “We have to use race to get beyond race.”

It is an idea that persists today. In courtrooms, race has become the prime concern in jury selection and criminal trials like the O. J. Simpson case. In universities, students are admitted and professors are hired because of the race and gender boxes they check on bureaucratic forms. And in political campaigns, playing the “race card” is considered smart strategy.

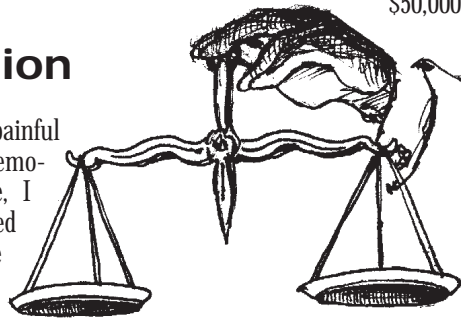
When I was appointed as a UC regent in 1993, I met many individuals whose lives had been irreparably damaged by the new discrimination. One was Janice Camarena. After her husband, an American of Mexican descent, died and left her with three children to support, Janice decided to go back to school. She enrolled in a remedial English course at San Bernardino Valley Community College. On the first day of the term, the instructor said, “There are two people who will have to leave.” She singled out Janice and the only other white student, saying, “This class is reserved for African Americans.” There was laughter as they were escorted out of the room.

It seems that the course was part of a special outreach program financed by the University of California, and admission was based on race. Janice could not graduate unless she passed remedial English. So, she signed up for another course. But it was restricted to Latinos. She was thrown out again.

As a regent, I also discovered firsthand that the University of California was awarding lucrative contracts on the basis of race and gender. Procurement officers were so eager to hire firms at least nominally owned by females or “historically underrepresented minorities” that they were allowed to waive competitive bidding on all jobs under

\$50,000. Considerations of cost, reputation, experience and competence could be brushed aside. Only white males were told that they need not apply.

And I found out that the new discrimination ruled not just in the university system but in virtually every state-subsidized enterprise. At the Ventura Fire Department, for example, examiners canceled a firefighter certification exam—the culmination of a rigorous two-year training program—because they felt that there wasn’t enough “diversity” among the candidates. Tough luck for those who had spent two years preparing for nothing.



Treating Individuals as Individuals

The California Civil Rights Initiative was designed to abolish the new discrimination. What did it say? Simply this:

The state shall not discriminate against, or grant preferential treatment to, any individual or group on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity or national origin in the operation of public employment, public education, or public contracting.

The initiative won a huge victory at the polls on November 5, 1996. Why? One reason may be that there is more natural (i.e., the opposite of state-mandated) diversity in California than any other place in the world. Driving the freeways of Los Angeles on any given day, we see hundreds of billboards advertising businesses in foreign languages. Walking the streets of San Francisco, we see men and women of every color representing every nation.

And when we travel not just across California but

across America, we can see that all our citizens have unprecedented opportunities to succeed—that is, when they rise above the politics of exclusion and envy.

Are there still serious racial and ethnic tensions to overcome? Are there still bigots among us? Of course. But the overwhelming success of CCRI reminds us that the majority of Americans want tolerance, peace, and understanding. We support policies that unite men and women, Christians and Jews, Democrats and Republicans, blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and whites. And in our daily lives we treat individuals as individuals, not as members of competing special interest groups.

What is also important to remember is that, despite our differences as individuals, we have something in common: We are citizens of a great land founded on the glorious principle of *freedom for all*. Our national identity is summed up in one immortal line from the Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.

A Little Colorblindness

The passage of CCRI makes me optimistic that someday soon we will be a nation in which our children are judged, as Reverend Martin Luther King envisioned, “not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

But it is more than a single political victory in a single state that gives me hope. When I was 15, I worked 27 hours a week at a fabric store. School let out at 2:30 p.m., and I had to run home in order to grab a sandwich and catch the 2:45 p.m. downtown bus. Each day, the driver would pace his route to give me time to get to the bus stop, and then he would drive like a daredevil to get back on schedule once he had picked me up. The driver was white, and he could certainly see that I was not. But race didn’t matter to him. His act of kindness was color-blind.

It is high time that those who are obsessed with color develop a little colorblindness. We have to stop dwelling on past injustices like slavery and segregation. And we have to accept this fact: We can’t use race to get beyond race.

President John F. Kennedy was right when he declared, “Race has no place in American life or law.” Every time we use race, ethnicity, or sex as the basis for conferring a public benefit, we inject a dose of poison into our body politic. We widen the divide that separates people of different races, beliefs, and cultures. We create a fault line potentially more destructive than any earthquake.

The Promise of Equality

We are citizens of a great land founded on the glorious principle of *freedom for all*.

Recently, the *New York Times* published a front-page article about “yours truly” that underscores this point. It described me as a balding, plump fellow with deep bags under my eyes and great bushy eyebrows. Well, I am all of these things, although I never really

thought that my eyebrows were such a big deal. But the article went on to add that I was a man without “ethnic pride.”

One of the reporters who interviewed me called and asked, “Mr. Connerly, what are you?” I replied, “I am an American.” He didn’t care for my answer and what he doubtless regarded as my flippant attitude. This is how the rest of our conversation went:

“No, no, no! What *are* you?”

“Yes, yes, yes! I am an American.”

“That is not what I mean. I was told that you are African American. Are you ashamed to be African American?”

“No, I am just proud to be an American.”

When I shared the story of my ancestry with him, he asked, “Well, what does that make you?” And I replied, “That makes me all-American!”

I *am* proud of my ancestors (Irish, North American Indian, French, and African, if you really want to know) who not only defied conventions about race but challenged the law when it was in error. The governments of their day denied them such basic freedoms as the right to marry and the right to own property, but they believed so much in the American experiment that nothing deterred them. They tried to fulfill the promise of equality found in the Declaration of Independence.

They would have loved the California Civil Rights Initiative, which proved that the courage and convictions of ordinary people can triumph over powerful special interests and media smear campaigns. But what is even more important is the fact that they would have recognized CCRI for what it was—not just an effort to end an era of racial and sexual preferences but a test of our

capacity to govern ourselves.

Just as I am proud of them and their contribution to the principle of equality in America, I believe their Irish, Indian, French, and African eyes are smiling in recognition of the contribution I am making to advance their commitment to our nation's ideals. ▲

The Shavano Institute Celebrates 15th Anniversary

The Shavano Institute for National Leadership held its 15th anniversary program in Colorado Springs on October 29-30. To date, the Institute

has held nearly 100 seminars for over 14,000 business and community leaders around the country. ▲



Hillsdale College President George Roche with Cornerstone Christian Academy's fourth grade teacher Ellen Didion and Principal Tom Olmstead. Mrs. Didion won Hillsdale's 1997 Salvatori Prize for Excellence in Teaching.



The event began with an honor guard from the U. S. Air Force Academy.



In his keynote address, General H. Norman Schwarzkopf cited character as the key to leadership.



Wall Street Journal writer John Fund discussed political and technological trends and their impact on personal freedom.



Trustee Charles McIntyre introduced Hillsdale College Student Ambassadors: Nathaniel Kent, Maren Herbst, Baltija Udrys, Brant Luther, Maile Young and Kadee Dreschel.

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