

The Final Report

Harvard's Affirmative Action Allegory

The Tragedy

Everyone in the Cambridge community knew it was a disaster the very moment it happened. . . . None who heard or saw it ever forgot the earth-shaking explosion and the huge, nuclear-like fireball. When the smoke cleared the following day, the former President's residence, 17 Quincy Street, had disappeared. A deep, smoldering crater marked the site in Harvard Yard where the building had stood.

The explosion and the all-consuming inferno claimed the lives of the President of Harvard and 198 black professors and administrators—the university's total complement of black, full-time professionals. As part of a year-long campaign to increase the number of minorities on campus, the university's Black Faculty and Administrators (the Association) had called for an all-day meeting with Harvard's President. He accepted the group's invitation, and the meeting had begun as scheduled. A much published group photograph taken during the lunch break, and intended to record those who attended, served to confirm those who died.

There were no clues as to what or who caused the explosion. Every possibility was explored: accident, terrorism, even supernatural forces. The official investigation, after months of searching, found little more than everyone knew in the first hour after the blast. A building and all within it had disappeared in a flash of fire that reduced even stone and steel to a fine, volcanic ash.

In the absence of answers, surmise served as substitute for fact. Many whites assumed that the Association was responsible: that, frustrated with their inability to increase their numbers, the blacks—or some of

them—had conspired to blow up the meeting place in a bizarre murder-suicide pact. Acting on this theory, racist hate groups launched random attacks on blacks. Rumors ignited riots in inner-city areas.

In time, the victims became martyrs to the cause of racial equality. The tragedy and the ensuing racial violence with its threat of social disorder prompted renewed commitment to affirmative action enforcement by long-dormant government agencies. Civil rights groups organized protest marches. The most spectacular of these marshaled more than a million college students who walked from their campuses to Harvard for the massive memorial service held at the Harvard stadium and the surrounding grounds. The investigation did uncover information about what came to be known as "the final meeting."

The Final Meeting

The final meeting at the Quincy Street house was closed, but files from both the President's office and the offices of the co-chairs of the Association contained the meeting agenda and a proposed affirmative action plan officers planned to discuss with the President. The proposed plan was dedicated to Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois who, following his graduation from Fisk University, entered Harvard in the fall of 1888. Two years later, he graduated, *cum laude*, with a major in philosophy, one of five graduating students chosen to speak at the commencement exercises.

At Harvard, Du Bois' intellectual gifts earned him the attention of faculty members William James, George Santayana, and Albert Bushnell Hart, who became his mentors. Academic ability though did not insulate Du Bois from the racial discrimination he encountered at every turn on Harvard's campus. His years were filled with loneliness and alienation. And despite clearly superior intellectual gifts, it was inconceivable that Harvard might offer Du Bois a faculty position at his *alma mater*.

In its prologue, the Association noted that Dr. Du Bois would now find a substantial number of black students at Harvard. Spared the overt hostility that Dr. Du Bois experienced, most still encounter color-based discrimination in many subtle and debilitating forms.

The Association acknowledged that in the last two decades, Harvard has established a Department of Afro-American Studies and an Institute named to honor W. E. B. Du Bois. At the administrative level, the university adopted an affirmative action plan in 1970. The Association noted

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that while their numbers remain minuscule, black teachers, staff, and students have made substantial contributions to the Harvard community.

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Background to the Final Report

No records survive of the discussions that followed the opening statements. Investigators, piecing together information gained from files and interviews with victims' relatives and friends, were able to provide a clear picture of Association efforts prior to the final meeting. The Association's goal was to improve what they deemed Harvard's abysmal record of hiring African American professors and professional staff. In the 1988-89 school year, only 17 of the 957 tenured faculty (1.8%) were black. And the 2,265 tenure-line or ladder faculty positions included only 26 blacks (1.1%).

Embarrassed and deeply concerned about their minuscule representation on the nation's most prestigious campus, Association officers met with Harvard's President in an effort to identify and discuss the reasons for Harvard's poor performance in hiring and retaining black faculty and administrators. Following that session, the co-chairs and the Association's executive committee decided to meet individually with the academic deans. . . . The deans readily acknowledged both the inadequacy of black representation on faculty and staff at their schools, and the many values their schools would realize with a greater than token black presence. They uniformly expressed their willingness to support actions that might improve the numbers of blacks in teaching and staff ranks. Several deans reviewed actions they had taken or planned to increase the number of black students, faculty, and administrators, while still others gave varying reasons for the embarrassingly small numbers of blacks on their faculties: the decrease in the number of black American doctorates; the lack or inadequacy of pools from which black applicants might be drawn; the lack of openings; the lack of funds for hiring new faculty; and the difficulty in obtaining tenure. The most often heard explanation was that faculty openings required qualifications which few if any blacks hold. . . .

A generous assessment of these meetings is that the President and the academic deans were concerned about minority hiring but comfortable with existing hiring criteria. The Association saw its task as bringing the deans and their faculties to at least recognize that their frequently ex-

pressed resistance to hiring African Americans with success and experience in other than traditional academic fields contradicted both logic and past hiring patterns for both whites and blacks. The deans found little significance in the facts that:

1. African Americans have been hired and promoted at Harvard despite (for some) a lack of traditional qualifications. Many of these individuals now perform at a high level of effectiveness, a fact that does not alter the too readily expressed fear that minority candidates without traditional qualifications may not succeed.
2. Not all whites hired and tenured in accord with traditional, academic criteria perform at consistently high levels as teachers and scholars.

Notes from a planning session held by Association leaders indicate that they planned to emphasize the following barriers to increasing the percentage of black faculty and administrators at Harvard:

White Superiority: During Du Bois' years here (and likely for three-quarters of a century thereafter) the strictures of law and widely held prejudices about the superiority of whites and the inferiority of blacks barred all blacks—including those with Du Bois' academic qualifications—from any position of importance at Harvard. The inertia generated and sustained during this long exclusionary period survived the enactment of anti-discrimination laws. Whether intended or not, questions of qualifications now serve subtly the role once performed overtly by racially exclusionary policies.

Faculty Conservatism: Tenured faculty exercise the major role in hiring and promotion decisions. Almost by definition, they are conservative when it comes to admitting new members to their ranks. They take seriously their roles of guardians of Harvard's scholarly reputation. This guardianship is appropriate, but in practice it simply replicates the status quo by selecting candidates from similar backgrounds, with interests and ideology like those of current faculty members. . . .

Scholarly Compatibility: Even outstanding scholarship, if not performed in a traditional format, can disqualify a candidate seeking a position or promotion. Narrow measures of excellence harm many candidates, but tend to exclude disproportionately large numbers of blacks whose approach, voice, or conclusions may depart radically

from traditional forms. As a result, the selection process favors blacks who reject or minimize their blackness, exhibit little empathy for or interest in black students, and express views on racial issues that are far removed from positions held by most blacks including—often enough—the groups who pressured for an increased minority presence.

Tokenism: While the lack of an adequate pool of blacks with traditional qualifications serves as the major excuse for little or no progress, it is apparent (from the drop in interest in minority recruitment after one or two blacks are hired) that an unconscious but no less real ceiling limits the number of blacks that will be hired in a given department—regardless of their qualifications.

The Secret Tape

A cassette tape, uncovered by police investigators during their zealous search for clues, contained recorded portions of an Association planning session. . . . The footage reveals a quite heated argument over whether the Association should sponsor a series of direct action protests.

Ramona Berrywell, a personnel officer in the graduate school, strongly supported demonstrations. According to friends, she had not been much engaged in racial issues until she was passed over for promotion three times in a ten-year period. She filed and ultimately prevailed in a long and bitter employment discrimination proceeding. Berrywell's voice came through clearly on the poor recording.

Ms. Berrywell: "I understand why you tenured faculty types are opposed to protests. You are afraid they would be undignified, and not in keeping with your image."

[Muffled response]

"Listen. Neither your titles nor your tenure can change the fact that Harvard is no less a plantation for you faculty folks than it is for black administrators who can be—and are—eased out if we do anything that is threatening to our white supervisors, including doing our jobs more competently than those we watch 'move on up' while we are expected to wave them on and satisfy ourselves with the thought: 'at least I work for Harvard.'"

[Incoherent discussion to which Ms. Berrywell responds:]

"Quality of life for blacks on this campus? We work hard and smile pretty while doing it. In return, they tolerate us, but we are not part of the family."

[Several comments of disagreement with an unidentified professor's voice coming through:] "Ramona, you're wrong. We are treated like everyone else. I don't want to be pampered."

Ms. Berrywell: "Professor, I know you have been here a long time, and you have earned far more respect than you receive. But you signed that South Africa divestment petition with the rest of us, and what response did it get us besides gross rationalizations? Can you imagine what Harvard's reaction to apartheid would be if a black minority subjugated a large, indigenous, white majority in South Africa—or anyplace else for that matter?"

"We are the surviving by-products of the 1960s riots. Unless we act, Harvard will return to its comfortable, all-white status. We will get nothing we do not insist on. I promise you one major demonstration: a 24-hour vigil around Massachusetts Hall, a 9-to-5 sit-down strike in the Yard, even a 2-hour gospel sing while blocking the passage under Holyoke Center. Any of these protests will get the message across that we want promotions as well as jobs, respect as well as pay, consideration and not condescension masked behind a thin veil of civility."

Professor: "We need to stop the hypocrisy. We know and they know that very few blacks are qualified for professional teaching or staff positions at Harvard. Neither pretense nor threats will change that. Face it. If racism has been as devastating as we claim and has prevented all but a few black folks from gaining Harvard-level credentials, we need to stop demanding that they hire nonexistent people. And if despite racism, qualified blacks are begging to be hired, we need to tell the schools where they can be found and stop complaining about discrimination."

Ms. Berrywell: "But for what you call 'hypocrisy' by activists in the 1960s, Professor, neither of us would have our jobs. The pool of blacks is so small because there are so few jobs. And that won't change unless we demand that Harvard find those who can do the work and train those who have the potential."

"I know some of you fear that protests will worsen our situations, perhaps justify our dismissals, and certainly ensure that any of us who participate will never be promoted."

Professor: "Ramona, protests are not appropriate for persons in an academic setting. We will turn off the university policymakers and give them an excuse not to take us seriously. Why not continue writing the President for more aggressive enforcement of existing affirmative action

regulations, and then request a meeting with him to discuss our concerns?"

Ms. Berrywell: "The President is not God. His office gives him influence, but he has little more power over tenured faculty than we have. We must give him a reason for insisting on a vigorous affirmative action effort. If we don't act, who will? Remember what Preston Wilcox, the Harlem activist, preaches: 'No one can free us but ourselves.'"

"Friends, we won't live forever. If they ask in the Hereafter what did you do to help the cause of your people, don't you want to be able to say more than that you worked at Harvard University?"

[The balance of the tape was blank.]

Discovery of the President's Plan

One month after the explosion and just prior to the massive memorial service to honor all those who lost their lives in the catastrophe, a proposal turned up among the late President's papers. Scribbled comments suggested that he had planned to present the paper to the Association at some point during the final meeting. The statement read: "... I agree that it is time to honor our words with deeds and linking a new affirmative action program with Dr. Du Bois' name is an excellent idea. Therefore, I plan to issue a proclamation commemorating the Centennial of Dr. Du Bois' Harvard presence with a Du Bois Talented Tenth black recruitment and hiring program.

"The goal of this program is that by the Fall of 1990—the 100th anniversary of Dr. Du Bois' graduation from this institution—ten percent of Harvard's faculty and administrators should be black, Hispanic, Asian, or Native American. . . .

"Our black students need teachers. Teachers are models as well as trainers, and while, as Du Bois and dozens of educational studies would agree, not all teachers of black students need be black . . . some representative number of faculty should be persons of color. Adopting Du Bois' Talented Tenth standard as the immediate goal for all Harvard faculty and administrative positions is both a reasonable and appropriate means of moving Harvard's affirmative action commitment beyond tokenism.

"I plan to organize the Talented Tenth program along the following lines: During the 1988–89 school year, the President's office will sponsor

a search and recruitment program including necessary timetables that will enable every department to begin a vigorous campaign intended to locate and attract black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American faculty and staff.

"During the 1989–90 school year, the recruitment efforts should enable available vacancies to be filled by persons of color until the school or unit contains no less than ten percent [minorities]. Where despite good-faith efforts vacancies cannot be filled with persons of color by the end of the 1989–90 school year, then an amount equal to the salary of the majority person hired should be used to promote a visit, fund a scholarship or fellowship, or in some other way further the Talented Tenth Centennial goal. This funding should continue each year until a minority candidate is recruited and hired. I would expect that the desired progress will be achieved without further sanctions by my administration.

... We must face that race has served for three centuries as an absolute bar for faculty status at Harvard. . . . My proposal responds to the need for reform that will improve rather than degrade Harvard's standards of scholarly excellence. First, by vigorous effort, vacancies can be filled by blacks who have either traditional qualifications or their equivalents. Second, where such persons cannot be found or recruited, funding equal to the salaries of those positions will be devoted to fellowships and other support that will enable promising students of color to gain the necessary credentials and experience to fill teaching and staff positions in the future, either here or at another school."

The Triumph

Read at the memorial service, the President's Plan was as effective as one would imagine. With a seldom-seen unanimity, the Harvard community made implementation of the "Talented Tenth" plan a matter of the highest priority. By the Fall 1990 deadline, the percentage of black faculty and staff reached levels double those at the time of the fatal explosion. In addition, scores of black graduate students were benefiting from the fellowship funds the plan provided. The program had captured national attention and was being emulated at colleges and universities across the country.

Finally, exactly two years after the never-explained explosion, an elegant building, the new home of the Du Bois Institute, opened on the site

of the disaster, a fitting memorial to the past and a stately manifestation of a university that had merged its commitment to affirmative action with impressive accomplishments.

Making Fiction Real

Happily, the tragedy described here never occurred. But who can doubt that so great a disaster would motivate concerted action to memorialize its victims with the realization of the Talented Tenth plan. This plan would add to the luster of a great university, and might well spark a national movement. This is the leadership role appropriate to Harvard. Acceptance of that role without the motivation of grief and the need to memorialize lost colleagues would not render that role less worthy. Most of us thought that the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* would close the book on racial discrimination and open a new era of opportunity that knew no color line. We were wrong. The challenge of overcoming white supremacy remains. Harvard cannot respond effectively to this challenge with a faculty whose blacks hardly constitute one percent of the total. To paraphrase Jesse Jackson, we are a better university than that.

CHAPTER 7

Nationalism, Separatism, and Self-Help

Nationalism, separatism, and self-help are major themes not only in Bell's writings but also in those of many black intellectuals. Should the black community look to whites for support, or learn to tend its own garden? When whites are the main architects of a civil rights breakthrough, is it likely to endure? How valuable are symbolic holidays and events commemorating, for example, Black History Month or Martin Luther King's birthday? Should blacks seek integration with whites, in schools, for example, or separation? What if a prominent black makes a disgraceful public statement, castigating Jews, for example? Should other blacks rush to denounce him? In the selections that follow, we see Bell's insistence that the black community play a decisive role in its own struggle, politics, education, and even economy—even in the face of white resistance.