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Until It Hurts
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The goals of the new abolitionist project were anticipated by the more radical of the 19th Century abolitionists. They sought not only to end slavery but also to secure equal rights for the Negro and the ending of racial prejudice. For them, chattel slavery was simply the worst form of the sin they wished to eradicate.

Lydia Maria Child warned of the consequences if slavery were ended but race prejudice remained: “Great political changes may be forced by the pressure of external circumstances, without a corresponding change in the moral sentiment of the nation; but in all such cases, the change is worse than useless; the evil reappears, and usually in a more exaggerated form.”

Affirmative action was introduced as one of the last policy measures of an almost thirty-year long effort by the federal government, responding to external and internal pressures, to improve the image of the United States on race matters – beginning with Truman’s order to desegregate the armed forces, and including the 1954 Supreme Court decision, the sending of troops to Little Rock, and the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts.

International circumstances have changed, and the nation’s moral sentiment has regressed. Anti-affirmative action activists

scour the landscape to uncover instances of worthy individuals denied opportunity because of what they like to call “reverse discrimination.” Not surprisingly, they omit all mention of the ways in which preferential treatment of whites continues to shape everyday life. Many remind us of Huck Finn’s father, who complained about the fancy clothes worn by a black professor in Ohio:

“And that ain’t the wust. They said he could vote when he was at home. Well, that let me out. Thinks I, what is the country a-coming to? It was ‘lection day, and I was just about to go and vote myself if I warn’t too drunk to get there; but when they told me there was a state in this country where they’d let that nigger vote, I drewed out. I says I’ll never vote ag’in... And to see the cool ways of that nigger — why, he wouldn’t ‘a’ give me the road if I hadn’t shoved him out of the way.”

Pap’s descendants are once again trying to push black folks out of the way. They are joined by some who argue against affirmative action from what they call a position of colorblindness. Their arguments have been answered elsewhere, and we have little to add; we consider affirmative action necessary to correct not past injustice but continuing discrimination, which is no less effective than in the past merely because it is less open.

But we note that such arguments sway fewer people each year, and that the opponents of affirmative action seem to be gaining the day. Faced with growing opposition, many of the backers of affirmative action seek to implement it quietly and unobtrusively, or to recast it so that it will not offend whites, thereby making it ineffective. That is a mistake: affirmative action can only be defended by acknowledging that it hurts individual whites, and by stating frankly that the pain is a necessary accompaniment to the birth of a new world.

We rarely quote Lincoln in these pages, considering him one of those who needed to be pushed rather than one of those who did the pushing. But there was one remark of his we think especially appropriate to the affirmative action controversy. In his Second Inaugural Address, he declared:

“Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled up by the bondsman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn by the lash shall be paid by another drawn by the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, ‘The judgements of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.’”

If Lincoln, the man of moderation, could reach this conclusion, then surely we can appreciate the power of extremism to shape popular opinion.