COMMENTARY

Anti-preference backers closing opportunity's door

Special to Sentinel-Voice

One result of the ban against affirmative action California's Proposition 209 imposed on the state's university system is in — and it is dismal.

This month, California's most selective universities admitted 50 percent fewer African-American and Latino-American applicants than last year. Of the 8,000 applicants that UC Berkeley admitted, it accepted only 191 black students. That's the lowest number since 1983.

Perversely, such advocates of Prop 209 as Stephen and Abigail Thernstrom, who co-wrote that outrageous book, *America in Black and White*, actually asserted in an April Op Ed article in the *Wall Street Journal* that African-Americans and Latino-Americans are better off.

Why? Because, they say, as more black and brown students gravitate to less rigorous universities, fewer of them will face the risk of failure at more rigorous institutions and they offer some hypothetical statistics to buttress their professed concern for the well-being of black and brown undergraduates.

But I've learned that it's always instructive to concentrate on their data instead of their rhetoric — because the two are often at odds.

For example, the table accompanying their article suggests that prior to Prop 209, 58 percent of the black students admitted to UC Berkeley would have graduated within six years. Now, without the supposedly weaker candidates cast aside by Prop 209, the Thernstroms predict that the graduation rate will soar to 84 percent.

They say African-Americans should take comfort in the fact that admission to less selective institutions will climb as well, producing more graduates overall in the bargain.

But their own data reveals why, with "friends" like these, who needs enemies?

To Be Equal

By Hugh B. Price
President
National Urban League

Prior to Prop 209, they projected that 347 black students would have graduated from Berkeley; after it, only 214 would finish within six years, because fewer would have enrolled in the first place.

That's a net loss of 133 black young people who, if not for Prop 209, would have graduated from one of America's greatest universities.

And by the Thernstrom's own estimates, the net gain in black graduates from less prestigious institutions is only 155 — a statistically inconsequential trade-off, even if it proves to be accurate. Yet the long-term cost to our community, and to the larger society, of fewer black graduates of Berkeley is incalculable.

Studies of Berkeley undergraduates' performance by the University's Office of Student Research completely undermine the Thernstrom's assumptions.

They show that the six-year graduation rate for undergraduates as a whole rose from the early 1980s to the early 1990s — as affirmative action produced significantly higher numbers of Black and Hispanic students.

For example, 68 percent of the predominantly white class that entered in 1981 graduated within six years. But 80 percent of the more diverse 1990 class did. During that period, the number of freshmen African-American and Chicano students increased by 32 and 296 percent, respectively.

In 1981, when the entering class was 4 percent Chicano, 55 percent of those students graduated in six years. But in 1990, when Chicanos made up 12 percent of the freshman class; their six-year graduation rate rose to 67 percent. The six-year graduation rate for African-American students during that time increased from 31 percent to 62 percent in the same period.

This data suggests what higher education experts have long said: The reason college students interrupt their studies often has little to do with their actual ability to do the work; these days many students must take time off to earn money for their family or to finance their own education.

The Thernstroms offer no statistics on how many of the ostensible "dropouts" from selective schools ultimately earn their bachelor's degrees, either by graduating from these very institutions, by enrolling at other institutions, or through night school. But there's no doubt that many students in the past and the present have used all these pathways to successfully pursue their bachelor's degrees.

During a debate us between last fall at Harvard University, I asked Stephan Thernstrom how he would feel if Harvard abandoned all consideration of race and happened not to admit any indisputably qualified black students. Professor Thernstrom said he saw nothing wrong with that outcome.

I do. America tried token integration a generation ago and found it wanting, morally as well as educationally. With the U.S. population moving inexorably toward the day when it's half Caucasian, half people of color, genuine inclusion is now an economic imperative as well. Why? Because the more highly

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Act would allow families of plane crash victims to sue government

By George Wilson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Just two years ago, the nation and the world were mourning the deaths of 34 people including the U.S. Commerce Secretary Ron Brown. Their ill-fated mission came to an abrupt end when their plane crashed into the side of a mountain in Croatia.

Since the crash, numerous individuals have raised questions about how this tragedy occurred.

According to a report issued by the Air Force's accident investigation board there were at least three factors that could have contributed to the crash: the assigned air crew made errors in planning and executing the flight; the command authorized flight procedures that had not been properly reviewed and approved; or the approach to the airport was improperly designated.

If the crash had occurred in the United States, the private citizens on board the aircraft would have been able to sue for gross negligence. However, because of the Federal Tort Claims Act, civilians who are killed or injured overseas are not eligible for compensation. Things aren't any better for the families of civilian federal employees.

In some cases, all the families were able to garner were a few thousand dollars through the Federal Employee Compensation Program, a mere pittance for the loss of a family member or loved one.

Sheila Christian is the widow of Duane Christian, a former member of Ron Brown's security detail. As a result of the crash she is left to raise their three children alone. Christian said the government let her down at the time when she most needed help.

"We have asked for numerous things from the government," she said. "At the beginning they said that they would give us anything that we needed, especially counseling. Right now it's going on two years and nobody has said anything else to us after April 13, 1996. I have asked for medical insurance for my family. I have written letters to the president and members of Congress, and the response I have gotten has not been good."

She continued: "I requested one hundred percent of my husband's salary, not 60 percent, because he didn't give 60 percent of his effort. I asked for this because I need to be at home as a full-time mom and not a part-time mom. The government has refused to give me what I felt my family deserved. The government has let us down."

Additionally, some of the families of the crash victims expressed shock that their loved one's plane did not meet the safety standards required for a commercial airline.

One parent said that she had always believed that military aircraft were safer.

Washington D.C. Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton and 39 of her colleagues have introduced a bill known as the Ron Brown Tort Equality Act of 1998, to address the unfairness of the current law.

The proposed legislation would allow federal civilian employees to sue the government for gross negligence by its employees or officers, and would also allow persons who do not work for the federal government, including the families of those who were killed with Secretary Ron Brown, to sue the United States for negligent or wrongful acts or omissions that occur in a foreign country.

During a press conference that announced the introduction of the legislation, Norton noted that "the families deserve more than the official funerals, the much deserved tributes and our continuing grief. They deserve more than the insult to their injury that would remain if the laws are not altered in light of the tragedy and families are not fully compensated."

Christian said Brown's death drew an

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Carl Rowan's Commentary

Jones' case reveals cracks in judicial system

Special to Sentinel-Voice

CARL ROWAN

Most Americans are expressing joy that Judge Susan Webber Wright has put a dramatic end to the Paula Jones sexual harassment case.

For years that sordid case has been the maggot in their Sunday dinner, the dark cloud that prevented them from really enjoying sunny times in America.

Still, I am not among those rejoicing over Judge Wright's stunning summary judgment because this case reeks with unnecessary victims who know that there is something wrong with the judicial process.

I'm not talking about the damage to Bill Clinton and his reputation; he is the one victim who probably deserved to suffer some. I'm talking about all the women whose reputations were sullied as Jones' conservative backers tried recklessly to prove that Clinton is a brazen womanizer who rewards those who "put out" and punishes those who rebuff his sexual advances.

Former White House intern Monica Lewinsky will spend a lifetime trying to recover from the lurid publicity (and perhaps criminal charges) growing out of allegations that she had a sexual affair with the president.

The Jones case provoked Kathleen Willey into making a tense charge on nationwide television that Clinton propositioned and groped her, only to have serious doubts cast upon her credibility. She will be forever wounded.

A former Miss Arkansas and Miss America, Elizabeth Ward Gracen said publicly just this past week that she had consensual sex with Clinton when he was governor of Arkansas 15 years ago — an admission she said she was making to quash rumors from Paula Jones' camp that Clinton had raped her in a limousine. She must wish she'd have waited a week more before confessing.

The Jones team, in legal desperation, simply did not honor the request for privacy of any woman they suspected of having sex with Clinton. They angered Judge Wright by publicizing the name of "Jane Doe No. 5," a woman who they said, in a sensational and irresponsible charge, was raped by Clinton 20 years ago. The woman had denied it under oath.

Is our court system so helpless that it cannot protect people who are only tangentially involved from having their sex lives broadcast to the world?

Last August, when she dismissed Jones' claim that she had been defamed and deprived of liberty through "false imprisonment" and "injury to reputation," Judge Wright surely already knew that Jones did not have a viable case. Was it a requirement of law that she allow a long process of "discovery" that was marked by reckless allegations and leaks before she could make summary judgment?

The people are ready to be done with divisive games that are part born of law and part born of partisan politics. But as the Jones part of this little tragedy has shown, it takes a long time, a courageous judge and a lot more for the people's wishes to prevail.