



# White Benefits? A Personal Assessment

by Paul Kivel

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**WHEN I BEGAN TO TAKE CAREFUL STOCK** of my family's history over the last 60 years, I could trace the powerful and long-lasting benefits that have accrued to me and to my family because of affirmative action programs for white people in general and white men in particular. I began to see the numerous ways that my father and I, and indirectly the women in my family, have benefited from policies that either explicitly favored or showed a preference for white men, or explicitly excluded people of color and white women from consideration altogether.

Let me begin with my father,<sup>1</sup> who served overseas in a desk job in the military during World War II. When he returned he was greeted by many government programs specifically designed to reintegrate him into society and help him overcome the disadvantage of having given his time to defend the country. The three most substantial programs were the G.I. Education Bill, the Veteran Administration Housing Authority, and the Veteran Administration health care system.

The benefits from these programs were primarily (although not exclusively) available to white men. As one study concludes, "Available data illustrate clearly that throughout the post-WWII era the benefits provided by each and every component of the MWS [militarized welfare state] disproportionately accrued to whites. Jim Crow and related overt exclusionary policies ensured that African Americans' proportion of WWII veterans was significantly less than their portion of the total population. In the Korean War veterans population they were nearly as underrepresented."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I could just as easily begin with my grandparents, who came to this country as Jewish refugees from pogroms in Poland and Russia. They took jobs that African Americans and Asian Americans were prohibited from taking, they bought land in areas where people of color were prohibited from owning land, they voted in elections for white politicians when people of color could not vote, much less run for office, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Bristow Hardin, "Race, Poverty and the Militarized Welfare State," Poverty & Race Research Action Council (January/February 1999). This article is available on the Internet at <http://www.prrac.org/topics/jan99/hardin.htm>.



During most of World War II the armed services were strictly segregated. After the war, many people of color were denied veterans' benefits because they had served in jobs that were not considered eligible for such benefits. Many more were deliberately not informed about the benefits, were discouraged from applying when they inquired about them, or simply had their applications for benefits denied. The report cited above concludes "Thus, not only were far fewer blacks than whites able to participate in these programs, but those blacks who could participate received fewer benefits than their white counterparts."<sup>3</sup>

My father was able to continue his education on the G.I. bill (attending the nearly all-white and largely male University of Southern California). He was not unique. 2.2 million men received higher education benefits from the G.I. Bill. In fact, by 1947, half of all college students were veterans.<sup>4</sup>

My father applied to Merrill, Lynch, Pierce, Fenner, and Bean for a training program to become a stock broker—a program open only to white men. If he and the other white male job recruits had had to compete with white women and men and women of color, fewer than half of them would have ended up with those jobs. Being a stockbroker was just one of many lucrative professions reserved for white men. When my father completed his training and joined the firm, he was on the road to economic success with all the resources of a national financial corporation behind him.

Besides the immediate income from his wages and commissions as a stockbroker, there were other financial benefits he had privileged access to. The company had a generous pension plan. That had a significant effect later on in our family's life, but at the time it meant that my parents could save money for a car and for their children's college education because they knew their retirement was secure.

My father was also able to contribute to Social Security, which had been set up primarily to benefit white male workers during the Depression. My father (and mother and, indirectly, their children) benefited from the program when he retired. Although many people with jobs were eligible to contribute to Social Security, millions more were not eligible. President Franklin Roosevelt knew he could not pass the Social Security bill without the votes of

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<sup>3</sup> Of course there were few women of any color who were eligible for veterans' benefits, although women served in many capacities vital to the war effort. Many white women and men and women of color were, in fact, displaced from manufacturing and sales jobs after the war in favor of affirmative action for white men.

<sup>4</sup> According to West's Encyclopedia of American Law at <http://www.wld.com/conbus/weal/wgibill.htm>.



Southern agricultural and Western mining interests that controlled key Congressional committees. These interests were unwilling to support the bill if people of color, particularly agricultural workers, were included.<sup>5</sup> The compromise was to create a system in which the benefits were specifically set up to exclude large numbers of people of color (and, incidentally, white women) by excluding job categories where they were concentrated, such as agricultural and domestic workers. Many hundreds of thousands more people of color were in job occupations that qualified for Social Security, but earned too little to be able to participate.<sup>6</sup>

My father had secured a good job and was eligible for a housing loan because of affirmative action. Of course, he still had to find a house that could be both a shelter for his family and an investment. Like most white Americans of the period, he wanted to live in a white suburban neighborhood with good schools, no crime, and rising property values. Many Americans, however, were excluded from buying houses in precisely those kinds of neighborhoods because they were not white males. People of color and unmarried women were not shown properties in those neighborhoods, government Veterans Administration (VA) and Federal Housing Authority (FHA) loan policies made it hard for them to get loans, banking red-lining policies denied them loans, and many real estate agents participated in exclusionary real estate covenants (agreements not to sell to people of color or, sometimes, Jews) – all of which gave my father and other white males with steady jobs non-competitive access to affordable and good-quality suburban housing.

For example, the FHA specifically channeled loans away from the central city and to the suburbs, and its official handbook even provided a model “restrictive covenant” to prospective white homebuyers and realtors.<sup>7</sup> The FHA and the VA financed more than \$120 billion worth of new housing between 1934 and 1962, but less than 2 percent of this real estate was available to non-white families.<sup>8</sup> Some people of color did buy houses during this period but they were often restricted to living in poorer, racially segregated neighborhoods with inadequate schools, infrastructure, and community services. The initial investment that a black family

<sup>5</sup> Eric Foner, “Hiring Quotas for White Males Only,” *The Nation*, June 26, 1995, p. 24.

<sup>6</sup> Dalton Conley, *Being Black, Living in the Red: Race, Wealth, and Social Policy in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 36.

<sup>7</sup> Melvin L. Oliver and Thomas M. Shapiro, *Black Wealth/White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 39.

<sup>8</sup> George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), p. 6.



made either did not grow or grew at a far less substantial rate than that of their white counterparts.

In addition, the federal home-mortgage interest tax deduction meant that the government subsidized my father's purchase of a house at the direct expense of people who did not have affirmative action programs or other means to help them buy a house and therefore were renters. This provided my father additional tens of thousands of dollars of support from the government over his adult lifetime. Researchers estimate that these affirmative action housing programs for white men have cost the current generation of African Americans alone approximately \$82 billion.<sup>9</sup>

The results of all of this affirmative action provided my family with more than just financial benefits. For me, specifically, I was able to go to a public school with many advantages directed at me as a white male. These special programs included heavy investments in science programs, sports programs, college preparatory classes, and leadership programs. There were no students (or teachers) of color at my school, so these advantages were only for white people. And most of these programs were designed for the boys; girls were discouraged from participating or straightforwardly refused the opportunity.

Meanwhile the government was subsidizing suburban development, and my family enjoyed parks, sports facilities, new roads—an entire infrastructure that was mostly directed to the benefit of white men and their families, even though the entire population paid taxes to support it.

Of course my mother and my sister enjoyed substantial benefits from all of this white male affirmative action—as long as they stayed attached to a white male. They did not receive these benefits on their own behalf or because they were felt to deserve them. They received them because they supported and were dependent on a white man. Even though my father was verbally and emotionally abusive towards my mother, she did not contemplate leaving him, partly because she did not have the independent financial means to do so nor did she have access to the kinds of affirmative action that he did.

Conversely, not all white men could take advantage of many of these benefits. If they were too poor or too poorly educated, if they were gay or had a disability, they were seriously limited in how much of these affirmative action programs they could take part in.

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<sup>9</sup> Oliver and Shapiro, *Black Wealth/White Wealth*, p. 151.



When it came to jobs, housing, and education, these men were not welcomed, discriminated against, screened out, or denied access to many of the benefits my father was able to enjoy.

Growing up as the son of a white male in a society in which affirmative action programs for white men were abundant in every area of community life, I viewed these benefits as natural and inevitable. I came to believe that because I lived in a democracy where equal opportunity was the law of the land, white men must be successful because they were superior to all others. They must be smarter, they must work harder, my father must be a much superior person to all the other people around him except similarly endowed white men. No one ever qualified his success to me by describing all the advantages he had been given or labeled him an affirmative action baby. The prevalent assumption was that he had worked hard for, and therefore deserved, what he had, and those who didn't have as much must not have worked hard enough.

My father made good, sound decisions in his life. He was intelligent and worked hard. He worked hard enough and was smart enough to take advantage of the social support, encouragement, and direct financial benefits that were available to him. Many white women, and men and women of color, were just as smart and worked just as hard and ended up with far, far less than my father.

As a result of all of these white benefits, my father retired as a fairly wealthy and successful man at the age of 50. By that time I was already enjoying a new round of affirmative action programs.

My parents could afford private college tuition, but just in case they could not my father's company offered scholarships for white males, the sons of employees. When I looked at private colleges I received the impression that these colleges also provided affirmative action programs—most were only open to white people and had very strong preferences for white males. In fact, at that time, some of those considered the best were only open to men.

There was a more specific affirmative action program offered at many of these schools—legacy admissions. Children of alumni were given special preferences. I was told that if I wanted to go to my father's university, USC, I had an excellent chance of getting in *regardless of my qualifications* because my father had gone there.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Legacy admissions were started in the 1920s by elite eastern schools to give the children of old monied white families an edge, a clear preference over the children of Jewish and other recent immigrants who



I ended up attending Reed College in the mid 1960s, a school that had no faculty of color, only one white woman faculty member, and barely a handful of students of color until my senior year. During my college years I was strongly encouraged in my studies and urged to go on to graduate school, which I could see was even more clearly a white male preserve.

By the late 1960s the United States was fully engaged in the Vietnam War. The U.S. government reinstated the draft and developed yet another affirmative action program for white males—especially white males from affluent families—the college draft deferment. Proportionately few students of color were attending college in those years, and large numbers of white males were. One way to keep well-off white male students from being drafted was to create a special policy that gave them preferred status in the draft. This naturally resulted in fewer young men being eligible for the draft, so the armed forces lowered its standards so it was able to recruit more men of color who had previously been rejected. The results of these policies were that in 1964, 18.8 percent of eligible whites were drafted, compared to 30.2 percent of eligible blacks. By 1967, when there was larger-scale recruitment, still only 31 percent of eligible whites were inducted into the military compared to 67 percent of eligible blacks. I was able to avoid the draft entirely because of affirmative action for white men and what Michael Eric Dyson has called the affirmative retroaction policies of the military, which targeted men of color for recruitment.<sup>11</sup>

If I had wanted to serve in the armed forces, I could have used my education to get a non-combat job, or I could have applied to West Point or Annapolis and been assured that, as a white man, I wouldn't have to compete with women or with most men of color for a position as an officer.

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were outscoring them on entrance exams. As recently as the late 1980s, legacies were three times more likely to be accepted to Harvard than non-legacies, and on average, 20 percent of Harvard's freshmen class were legacy admissions. At Yale the ratio was 2 1/2 times more likely to be accepted, and Dartmouth admitted 57 percent of its legacy applicants, compared to 27 percent of non-legacies. The University of Pennsylvania even has a special office of alumni admissions that actively lobbies for alumni children. Legacy admissions are clearly preferences for less-qualified students. The Office of Civil Rights found that the average admitted legacy at Harvard between 1981 and 1988 was significantly less qualified than the average admitted non-legacy. This information is from John Larew, "Who's the Real Affirmative Action Profiteer?" *The Washington Monthly*, June 1991, reprinted in Nicolaus Mills, *Debating Affirmative Action: Race, Gender, Ethnicity, and the Politics of Inclusion* (New York: Delta, 1994), pp. 247–258.

<sup>11</sup> This phrase and the statistics on the draft are presented in Michael Eric Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: The Free Press, 2000), pp. 60–61.



When I graduated from college I was presented with a wide variety of affirmative action options. In fact, corporate recruiters were constantly at my predominantly white college offering us job opportunities. The affirmative action pension policies of my father's company and the government Social Security system guaranteed that my father and mother had a decent and secure living through their retirement years. Many of my working-class friends had to take any job they could get to support themselves or their parents or younger siblings. Since I had no one else to support, I could pursue the career or profession of my choice.

When I eventually became involved in a long-term relationship, my partner and I could take advantage of another generation of affirmative action programs since I had such a secure financial base. For example, when we wanted to buy a house we were given preferred treatment by banks when we applied for loans in the form of less paperwork, less extensive credit checks, and the benefit of the doubt about our financial capacity to maintain a house. Our real estate agent let us know that we were preferred neighbors in desirable communities and steered us away from less desirable areas (meaning neighborhoods with higher concentrations of people of color). In addition, because of my parents' secure financial position, they could loan us money for a down payment and co-sign our loan with us.<sup>12</sup> At every step of the way we benefited from the preference for well-off white males and their families. Subsequently, we could take full advantage of the home-mortgage tax deduction—the same tax benefit (i.e., public subsidy) for those who can afford to buy a house that my father had used. Poor and working-class people, including a large percentage of people of color, have not had the wealth or the “creditworthiness” to buy homes and therefore don't receive the substantial financial benefits the home mortgage interest tax deduction offers.<sup>13</sup>

Most of the government programs and institutional policies described above were not called affirmative action programs. Programs that benefit white men never are. They were seen as race- and gender-neutral, even though most or all of the benefits accrued to white men. These programs were not contested as

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<sup>12</sup> This generational advantage of affirmative action is quite common. The Los Angeles Survey of Urban Inequality, for instance, indicates that white home buyers are twice as likely to receive family assistance in purchasing a home as blacks (Oliver and Shapiro, *Black Wealth/White Wealth*, p. 145).

<sup>13</sup> Home ownership among whites overall is 63.8 percent. It is 41.6 percent for blacks, a 22 percent gap. In other words, blacks are about 65 percent as likely as whites to own their own homes (Oliver and Shapiro, *Black Wealth/White Wealth*, p. 109).



special preferences nor were the beneficiaries stigmatized as not deserving or not qualified.

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