

Running head: ETHICAL DILEMMA OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

Ethical Dilemma of Affirmative Action

MSG John B. Gutierrez

United States Army Sergeants Major Academy

Class 58

SGM Elmer Feick

December 7, 2007

Abstract

Affirmative action is a necessary tool to combat past discrimination but the application of this tool is often met with increased passion for and against it. Minorities tend to feel that their advancements should be on their own merit while the majority sometimes rationalizes the advancements of minorities as an unearned free pass due to race. Either way, it seems that everyone is against it, which causes the dilemma and question: when is it time to scrap affirmative action.

Ethical Dilemma of Affirmative Action

Introduction

The Army's Affirmative Action Plan (AAP) serves as a necessary tool to ensure equal opportunity but also creates ethical dilemmas due to race and gender issues. Proponents of affirmative action often face the negative connotations of groups who perceive it as taking from someone to give to another while ignoring merit. In this paper, I will discuss several factors involved in the affirmative action process that I have observed during my time as an Installation Equal Opportunity Advisor (EOA). Topics of discussion will consist of the history leading up to affirmative action, the Army's Affirmative Action Plan, past and present issues, perceptions, and effect on current military operations.

History

President John F. Kennedy initially coined the term affirmative action upon issuing Executive Order 10925 on 6 March 1961 creating the Committee of Equal Opportunity to ensure employment practices were free from bias (Timeline of Affirmative Action Milestones, 2007). Government agencies largely ignored affirmative action until President Lyndon B. Johnson took steps to enforcement during his presidency. During President Johnson's term, he signed the Civil Rights Act prohibiting discriminatory practices and issued Executive Order 11246 on 24 September 1965. Executive Order 11246 was the legislation that specifically directed enforcement practices by directing government contractors to incorporate affirmative action into all employment efforts. In addition, all contractors had to document their efforts to show compliance of affirmative action (Timeline of Affirmative Action Milestones, 2007). The evolution of affirmative action has led to numerous other laws leading to the current system of affirmative action that we currently use in the military.

In essence, affirmative action is the government's tool to close the gap for minorities and women due to past discrimination. Past discriminatory behavior such as slavery and women's rights were central to the creation of affirmative action. The premise is that you cannot flip a switch and say everything is equal as of today and those affected need legislation to close the gap. The gap included such factors as a lack of education, lack of earning power and skills, inability to vote, and other miscellaneous activities that hindered progress. In these particular cases, the majority oppressed the minority with some still feeling the effects today. The question many have is: "When will the gaps close?"

Necessity

The Army defines the need for an AAP to identify and establish goals that support Equal Opportunity (EO) promoting fairness, justice, and equality for all Soldiers regardless of race, color, ethnicity, religion, gender or national origin (DA PAM 600-26, 1990). Commanders identify goals on a published document called the Equal Opportunity Action Plan (EOAP) where benchmarks are published, tracked, and reviewed on an annual basis. The creation of the EOAP in itself is a dilemma due to the lack of enforcement. The EOAP tends to lose its bite because many of the benchmarks needed are unenforceable by a singular level due to military and civilian agencies that operate within their own doctrine. In essence, the individual agencies have internal mechanisms to ensure EO practices within with no requirement to report shortcomings to the Installation EO Team. The goals identified on the EOAP are often difficult to benchmark due to a lack of quantifiable data. The Army publicly acknowledges that it uses affirmative action for future goals, not for the establishment of quotas. Not having quotas is a good thing but the goals created on the EOAP often are identified as continuous in nature and nearly impossible to quantify.

When I taught affirmative action to students attending the Equal Opportunity Representative Class (EORC), I tend to get a range of responses both for and against affirmative action. In both cases, the arguments are often compelling with facts to back up their beliefs. I was also interested to find that many of the individuals against affirmative action were the minorities themselves. Many of the minorities took exception and believe that their current successes are not attributed to affirmative action. Also many minorities felt that it was somewhat prejudicial to further themselves at the expense of others. I find this to be interesting because it seems that a great many people are against affirmative action at the singular level. I would then give the students examples of a broad range of people still affected by past discrimination; consequently, the students grab the premise. Even then, most students still look to affirmative action with speculation.

In reality, the legislative bodies that are currently creating policies impacting affirmative action are those that benefitted from the old policies such as separate but equal. Although there are several success stories of minorities, the removal of affirmative action creates an unusual dilemma because it is hard to justify to individuals how a particular action is designed to impact the whole.

During my duty as an EOA, I have heard many reasons promoting affirmative action. One of the most memorable success stories of affirmative action was that of General Colin Powell. The story goes that President Carter's Secretary of the Army Clifford Alexander was proposed a list of personnel considered to promotion to Brigadier General consisting of only white candidates. Secretary of the Army Alexander sent the list back and asked for some blacks. Secretary of the Army Alexander selected Colin Powell for promotion from the revised list (Foer, 1997). The question is would General Powell have been promoted without affirmative

action or was it just a matter of time. Proponents say that Colon Powell's age at the time, 42, was not consistent with those eligible for promotion so therefore he should not have been put on the list to begin with. This again points to the effectiveness and fairness of affirmative action if indeed Colin Powell was promoted early when not everyone was given the same advantage (Foer, 1997). In hindsight, the Secretary of the Army Alexander's decision to promote Colon Powell has proven to be an excellent decision based on General Powell's legacy in the military as well as in government. I personally believe that affirmative action in the military is a good thing and that there needs to be checks and balances.

Opponent's View

Among the negative aspects of affirmative action is that there is a perception that minorities and women are given unfair opportunities not based on merit. In my experience, many in the military tend to feel that an unfair advantage exists but I tend to think of this as an excuse used by individuals who cannot accept their shortcomings. Yet sometimes it is hard to argue with Soldiers' arguments when they can show statistics of promotions and they reflect a pattern consistent with their argument. Another negative aspect of affirmative action is that many believe it to be viewed as an economic policy used to create upward movement using "reverse discrimination". The term reverse discrimination is often used but in reality, there is no such thing as reverse discrimination; discrimination is discrimination. For promotion purposes, it probably would be a good idea to give detailed classes to Soldiers highlighting the centralized promotion system because there is a large contingency of Soldiers who believe that the promotion system has shortcomings.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have talked about the ethical dilemmas associated to affirmative action

and how it translates itself within the army through the Army's Affirmative Action Plan. I highlighted the history of affirmative action, past and present issues, perceptions, and effect on current operations. Although many look at affirmative action with speculation, it is still a necessary tool for the near future. I found that the easiest way to avoid the individual dilemmas of those effected and look at the main reason, which is to impact groups as a whole. The pros and cons of affirmative action in the military all have sound reasoning, but I believe that affirmative action will be necessary probably until the next generation.

References

DA PAM 600-26. (1990, May 23). *Department of the Army Affirmative Action Plan* .

Foer, F. (1997, December 14). *Quotas and Colin Powell*. Retrieved November 11, 2007, from Slate: <http://www.slate.com/id/2097/>.

Timeline of Affirmative Action Milestones. (2007). Retrieved November 11, 2007, from infoplease: <http://www.infoplease.com/spot/affirmativetimeline1.html>.