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Affirming our commitment to opportunity

Affirmative action is one of the most divisive issues on the national agenda. The June 13 Supreme Court ruling has further heightened the debate and intensified the concern of proponents.

The original spirit of affirmative action was to ensure equality of opportunity in the society and workplace and to give minorities and women jobs and a place in the system.

But in today's society and under the current political climate, affirmative action has become a complex and sensitive myth.

(Note: I am a woman as well as a minority, who has not drawn direct benefits from affirmative action programs in my career. I am a business executive, inventor, author of books and worldwide lecturer and consultant.)

The key word in the context of affirmative action is "equality," not "preferences." Affirmative action programs are intended to bring the diverse human resources that this country is so blessed with and cherishes, to the national work force and to provide equal opportunities to all who are able and willing to contribute. However, before we decide whether affirmative action should or should not be abolished, we need to answer some basic questions:

✓ Do we have "true equality" in the United States?

✓ Does today's climate allow equal opportunities for everyone, blind of gender and race, without any governmental enforcement?

✓ Have any affirmative action programs gone astray from the original spirit? If so, which ones, and what are the causes for the drift?

✓ What changes are required to continue instilling and promoting the spirit of equality?

In today's society, can we objectively conclude that there are no "unequal" notions about women and minorities? Currently, tinted remarks are sprouting racially from a wide range of sources: ranging from a high-ranking U.S. Senator who ridiculed Judge Ito's Japanese accent (that the judge does not even have) to a prominent O.J. Simpson attorney who attempted to belittle a Chinese-descent criminol-

ogist with fortune cookie humor. A recent article in Newsweek headlined "Waiting for Table Scraps — Restaurant: High Class Still Means Men Only" reported that of the nation's nearly 1.5 million food servers, more than three quarters are women. It is also reported that the classier the restaurant (the bigger the tips), the fewer women it tends to hire.

On the bright side, messages such as "whites only, women unsuitable for ..." are considered things in the past and seem like ancient history. Compared with many years ago, minorities and women truly have been making significant progress, and the society has proceeded into an increasingly diverse makeup. We must attribute this level of progress in work force diversity and social change, at least in part, to the spirit of affirmative action and to the government's initiative.

In general, facts and data suggest that affirmative action for the last two to three decades has indeed served as a vehicle assisting minorities and women who otherwise would have been unable to get into the system. Many of these established minorities and women have become job creators in our country.

The world has changed and continues to change, and it may be time to reassess government policies and revise them to fit current society.

In view of the ever-increasing global competitiveness, no nation can afford underutilizing or wasting resources of talents, skills, intelligence and brain power. What is vitally important is to maximize the use of human resources by ensuring equal opportunities to minorities, women and all who have been disadvantaged and have not reached a level playing field. And what the minorities and women should strive for is to garner every opportunity but not dote on "entitlements" and "dependencies." When making changes at this point, perhaps we need to caution: Are we ahead of our time and are we throwing out the baby with the wash?

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