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Perspective

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The Future of Civil Rights in America

The Clinton administration has set its civil rights policies on a radical course permeated by race-consciousness, brazenly breaking candidate Bill Clinton's "new Democrat" assurances that he would pursue a politics of moderation and healing.

In his first two years Clinton has done nothing, absolutely nothing, to find common ground on race issues. Instead he has given over the entire federal civil rights apparatus to ideologues who cut their teeth in left-wing advocacy groups, unleashing them to pursue militant, in-your-face policies in areas touching the lives of every American.

After the election, Clinton righteously rebuffed demands for more appointments of women and minorities to his cabinet, denouncing his critics as "bean counters" who were "playing quota games." And when his first nominee for assistant attorney general for civil rights, former NAACP Legal Defense Fund lawyer Lani Guinier, was assailed for her radical views, Clinton withdrew the nomination.

But it turned out Guinier was no aberration, for Clinton's appointees to virtually every civil rights post bear the same activist pedigrees. The list reads like a roll call of establishment civil rights groups. Deval Patrick worked with Guinier at the NAACP Legal Defense Fund (LDF). Patrick plucked Kerry Scanlon from LDF's ranks for one deputy position, and for another chose Sabelle Pinzler, director of the American Civil Liberties Union's Women's Rights Project.

At the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), Clinton appointed as chairman former Air Force counsel Gilbert Casellas, who previously worked for the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund. The other two new commissioners are Paul Igasaki, who served as executive director of the Asian Law Caucus; and Paul Miller, formerly litigation director for the Western Law Center for Disability Rights. The commission's legal counsel, Ellen Vargyas, toiled in the litigation vineyards for the National Women's Law Center.

At the Department of Education, Clinton named as assistant secretary for civil rights Norma Cantu, regional counsel for the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund. Roberta Achtenberg, assistant secretary for fair housing and equal opportunity at the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), worked as executive director of the National Center for Lesbian Rights.

These appointments mark an historical milestone: for the first time, an entire area of federal policy—in this case civil rights—has been handed over wholesale to a special interest lobby. If Clinton somehow survives his civil rights policies, the reason will be the failure of Republicans to provide spirited opposition and a principled alternative. As historian Leonard Liggio sagely has observed, “Bad ideas always defeat no ideas.” But Republicans can change the civil rights equation if they discover two simple but well-kept secrets:

- 1) “Affirmative action” resonates little among most disadvantaged minorities. Few low-income people have ever benefited, or are in a position to benefit, from most affirmative action or set-aside programs, which concentrate their benefits on individuals with substantial skills or connections.
- 2) Americans of all colors still share common values and aspirations. Low-income people want the same things as other Americans want: safe neighborhoods; decent schools; and opportunities to own a home, pursue work or business opportunities, and seek a better future.

Those two basic principles provide the antidote to Clinton on civil rights: a strong denunciation of divisive racial preferences coupled with progressive policies to empower disadvantaged individuals to earn a share of the American Dream.

Our nation’s moral claim is staked in its commitment to civil rights—those fundamental rights we all share equally as Americans. We can deliver on that promise only if we abandon our dangerous experiments in race-based policies, and embrace forthrightly the values and principles that unite us as a people.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Clint Bolick is director of litigation at the Washington, DC-based Institute for Justice. He is the author of *Changing Course: Civil Rights at the Crossroads* (1988) and *Unfinished Business: A Civil Rights Strategy for America’s Third Century* (1990).

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THE HEARTLAND INSTITUTE
800 East Northwest Highway #1080
Palatine, Illinois 60067
phone 708/202-3060

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