

The Racism We Condemn

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We emerged from a dream-like political campaign, in which almost nothing of substance was said about racial issues, only to find that from St. Petersburg, Fla., to Pittsburgh the problems of alienation, resentment, contempt and enmity are still with us. And now, out of Texaco's corporate headquarters, out of its executive suite in White Plains, N.Y., comes evidence of unacceptable racist attitudes, and even the possible obstruction of justice.

Reactions across the political spectrum to the Texaco discrimination scandal illustrate the cynicism so rife in American race relations. Civil rights leaders called for a national boycott and demanded that Texaco resolve its discrimination case, expand its diversity training programs and increase its dealings with minority-owned businesses.

Peter I. Bijur, Texaco's chairman and chief executive, has moved with breathtaking speed to appease these demands. Texaco agreed on Nov. 15 to pay more than \$140 million to settle the lawsuit brought by its minority employees, and the company also pledged to turn its affirmative action programs over to a committee largely appointed by outsiders. This is all well and good, but much of what Mr. Bijur has so eagerly agreed to will do little to lessen racial tensions, inside his company or anywhere else.

Consider "diversity training." Texaco has pledged some \$35 million for employee workshops on race relations. Yet Texaco had already held such workshops. (Indeed, during the executive meeting recorded on tape, Robert Ulrich, the company's treasurer, called African-American employees "black jelly beans" -- a reference to something said at a diversity seminar!)

I doubt that anyone astute enough to rise to the top of a major corporation really believes that diversity workshops are the way to get blacks and whites to work together with mutual respect. But few will now dare give candid expression to that view. Hiring a diversity consultant is a primary way for the company to show its concern for minority sensibilities.

Or, consider the corporate focus on so-called economic development -- that is, buying more products from minority-controlled businesses and spending more on advertising in black media outlets. Jesse Jackson, who organized the nationwide boycott of Texaco, has for years made this economic brokering a centerpiece of his strategy. But this "development" rarely trickles down to rank-and-file black folk, and it does very little for those minority workers within the white-owned companies. But it is a relatively inexpensive way for companies to assure civil rights leaders that their demands have been met.

So much for the liberal solutions. But there is cynicism enough here to cover both sides of the political spectrum. For years, conservatives have been saying that we should be a color-blind society, that taking race into account in the workplace inhibits achieving this goal and that racial discrimination should be punished, case by case, wherever it exists. That sounds quite reasonable until one begins to think about the following question: How are we supposed to know whether discrimination exists?

At Texaco, fewer than 1 percent of those earning more than \$106,000 a year are black, and not one of the 49 highest-paid executives is black. From these numbers alone, it seems reasonable to conclude that blacks have a hard time attaining positions of real power. Indeed, Mr. Bijur effectively acknowledged that the numerical racial imbalances constitute a problem, *ipso facto*.

Yet conservatives who advocate a color-blind America think that one cannot prove discrimination with statistics. The color-blind argument insists that looking at employment numbers is wrong, that one should focus instead on the treatment of individuals.

But outsiders or lower-level employees are seldom privy to the complex deliberations and the raft of subjective judgments that go into the selection of the top people in any large, complex organization. Texaco, for instance, had used secret lists to designate which employees had the potential to be senior managers. In proving acts of discrimination, would conservatives always insist that African-Americans produce "hard" evidence like secret tape recordings of senior managers making racist or racially inappropriate remarks?

Of course, corporations also have an interest in collecting their own evidence -- to establish that they do not discriminate. So companies across the country will most likely be paying greater attention to work-force diversity, especially in the upper ranks. And the careers of more and more managers will now probably be determined in part by the number of minority employees they recommend for promotion.

Making the advancement of minority employees a measure of a manager's performance is particularly offensive to the color-blind idealists, since it practically guarantees that some promising blacks will receive preference over equally promising whites.

Another name for this practice is "affirmative action." Experience in the Army, and in a number of large businesses, has shown that some program of this sort -- which does not lower standards but concentrates on finding and promoting qualified blacks -- is probably the single most effective way to eliminate informal barriers to black advancement. Though it may not be politically correct on the right to say so, the Texaco case provides ample support for this point of view.

It is strange that this is a message that conservative theorists must learn from their more pragmatic political allies in business. Yet, I find it stranger still that the deep problems in the inner cities, issues that lie at the core of much racial tension in the country, go

untouched despite the frenetic activity by whites and blacks in the Texaco case. It would appear that, when civil rights leaders manage to get rich and powerful Americans to pay attention to racial justice, the most profound and enduring injustices are not part of the conversation.

That \$35 million which Mr. Bijur has promised the diversity consultants would do wonders for some inner-city school systems. But asking a penitent business organization to take some responsibility for uplifting the black poor does not appear to be part of the "development package." And, I admit, my proposal is a radical idea.

It's too bad that it takes insensitive and insulting remarks to make powerful businessmen acknowledge their sins and make their amends. And it's too bad that, even then, one does not presume to ask them to surrender too much of their wealth or power.

Drawing. (Stephen Doyle)