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978-0-521-51509-2 - Racial Integration in Corporate America, 1940-1990

Jennifer Delton

Excerpt

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Introduction

Like other steel companies in the early twentieth century, the Lukens Steel Company in Coatesville, Pennsylvania, hired large numbers of immigrants and African Americans. Lukens executives regarded both groups as racially separate from themselves but dealt with each differently. Charles Lukens Huston, Sr., who was in charge of operations and production, preferred immigrant labor to black labor. Concerned about high turnover among his immigrant workers, he engaged a consultant to instruct Lukens foremen and supervisors on how to be more culturally sensitive when dealing with foreign-born workers. In an effort to stem his increasing dependence on black labor, he lobbied against anti-immigration laws.¹

In Huston's eyes, black workers were dangerous, disruptive, and inefficient. He was fearful of them and felt inconvenienced by the special attention he felt they required – that is, segregation and policing. The main problem with black workers was where to put them. Housing was not a problem for immigrants because they could live anywhere, but blacks required a segregated space, even in Pennsylvania, and space was scarce. During World War I, Lukens had hired several hundred black southerners. Like other steel companies in the area, Lukens housed them in an encampment on plant grounds, watched over by Lukens's own police force. Huston referred to it as their "colored colony."² Huston worried constantly that noise and activities in the black encampments would disturb the neighbors. In an attempt to gain control

¹ See Charles L. Huston to John T. Clark, July 23, 1923, in Lukens Steel Company, Executive Officer Files, 1903–1979, Series II, Box 1999, File: Urban League of Pittsburgh and Charles L. Huston, Sr., to George K. Irwin, Jan. 12, 1920, in Lukens Steel Company, Executive Officer Files, 1903–1979, Series II, Box 1993, at Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, Delaware (hereafter HML).

² See, for instance, Charles L. Huston to John T. Clark, July 23, 1923, in Lukens Steel Company, Executive Officer Files, 1903–1979, Series II, Box 1999, File: Urban League of Pittsburgh, HML.

over the situation, he engaged a Negro welfare worker from the Armstrong Association of Philadelphia, an organization that worked to prepare African Americans for steady employment.

George W. Royall arrived at Lukens in December 1918. The understanding was that Royall would help improve the condition of the Negro workers and, Huston hoped, thereby relieve the policing burden.³ From the start, however, Royall’s methods excited suspicion. In a January 1919 letter to the Armstrong Association, Huston was concerned that Royall was “taking up the question of wages, employment, etc., with the men.” While allowing that it was natural that the men would come to Royall with complaints, he thought it unwise for him to try to address those complaints. Rather, he should, as Huston put it, “devote himself to the matters of improving the men’s habits in the way of spending their leisure time, and in adopting saving habits.”⁴

George Royall accordingly refocused his energies on leisure issues. But this too proved problematic. Huston wrote in horror, “He wanted to introduce boxing amongst our colored men; also proposed to have occasions when he would invite visitors to our colored camp and have dances. . . .” A devout Quaker, Huston had an aversion to boxing, which he felt was warlike, and modern dancing, which bordered on evil. But he had a particular aversion to black men boxing, because as he put it, boxing “is only fit for the training of soldiers and policemen,” and hence unsuitable for blacks.⁵ Royall was discharged. Huston attempted to remedy the problem by reducing the black workforce.⁶

Charles L. Huston, Sr., exhibited the classic elements of white American racism. He feared blacks’ physicality, their sexuality, their closeness to life. His horror that the welfare worker would have introduced to *these* people boxing or dancing was prompted by his belief that they already embodied, inherently, the worst elements of these activities – violence, merriment, sex. The reason they had to be kept separate from whites was not to prevent racial violence but to quarantine their social behavior and prevent miscegenation. His view of black people as licentious, lazy, and fun loving was a common one among whites at this time and clearly informed company employment policies.

³ Charles L. Huston to John T. Emlen, Nov. 23, 1918, in Lukens Steel Company, Executive Officer Files, 1903–1979, Series II, Box 1988, File: Armstrong Association, HML.

⁴ Both quotes from Charles L. Huston to John T. Emlen, January 2, 1919, in Lukens Steel Company, Executive Officer Files, 1903–1979, Series II, Box 1988, File: Armstrong Association, HML.

⁵ Both quotes in Charles L. Huston to John T. Emlen, Feb. 6, 1919, in Lukens Steel Company, Executive Officer Files, 1903–1979, Series II, Box 1988, File: Armstrong Association, HML. There were Quakers with abolitionist roots who continued to be sympathetic to the plight of African Americans. Huston was not part of this faction.

⁶ Charles L. Huston to A. L. Manley, Feb. 27, 1919, in Lukens Steel Company, Executive Officer Files, 1903–1979, Series II, Box 1988, File: Armstrong Association, HML.

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Color mattered, though executives were unaware of the extent to which it did. Executive communications about specific workers, which actually show a great deal of warmth, always identified nonwhite employees by their race or nationality, as in, “Rev. Wm A. Creditt, colored, of Downingtown, asked me to look up H.L. Webster, colored, who is working for us . . .”⁷ Huston’s sons, who helped run the company from the 1940s through the 1960s, were more circumspect but likewise carried within them unconscious assumptions about color and work. When Arthur A. Smith was denied employment at the Lukens Steel Company in 1941, he wrote to the company’s president for an explanation. It turned out that at five feet two inches and 130 pounds he was too small. Charles Lukens Huston, Jr., the director of Personnel Relations, explained, “Since Smith is a colored man, and since most colored men are required to do heavy work, I am inclined to agree . . . that the man in question is too light to work safely, without danger to others and to himself.”⁸ Sensing the delicacy of the situation, he added that someone should meet with Smith personally to explain why it was not in his interest to be hired at this time. It was not his color that was a problem, you see, but his size.

American employers regularly denied that they participated in racial discrimination. As the previous examples indicate, however, they did not understand what racial discrimination was. This book is about how they learned.

It is the premise of this book that American corporations played a significant role in opening the American workplace to racial minorities. Historians have attributed the racial integration of American workplaces in the late twentieth century to activists, the state, and labor unions. They have not only ignored corporations’ contributions to integration but have also portrayed them as impediments to it.⁹ Yet not all corporations were obstructionist. Just as certain

⁷ Charles L. Huston, Sr., to George K. Irwin, Sept. 30, 1920, in Lukens Steel Company, Executive Officer Files, 1903–1979, Series II, Box 1993, File: George K. Irwin, HML.

⁸ Charles L. Huston, Jr., to George K. Irwin, August 4, 1941, in Lukens Steel Company, Executive Officer Files, 1903–1979, Series II, Box 1993, File: Charles L. Huston, Jr., HML.

⁹ On the role of activists in integration, see Nancy MacLean, *Freedom Is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); Terry H. Anderson, *The Pursuit of Fairness: A History of Affirmative Action* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Timothy Minchin, *Hiring the Black Worker: The Racial Integration of the Southern Textile Industry, 1960–1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), and Minchin, *The Color of Work: The Struggle for Civil Rights in the Southern Paper Industry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001). On the role of the state, see Judith Stein, *Running Steel, Running America: Race, Economic Policy and the Decline of Liberalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Hugh Davis Graham, *The Civil Rights Era: Origins and Development of National Policy, 1960–1972* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Bruce J. Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938–1980*, rev. ed.

unions championed racial integration, so too did certain corporations. My aim in recognizing corporate efforts is not to celebrate their enlightened antiracism but rather to provide a more complete understanding of how a key sector of American society was integrated in the latter half of the twentieth century. There were executives and managers at large corporations who promoted fair employment, equal employment opportunity, and, later, affirmative action. There is abundant evidence that large employers embraced some form of affirmative action long before the federal government required it. We can choose to ignore this or we can attempt to explain it.

Activism on the part of African Americans and their allies was the original impetus for the changes I examine in this book, which is why the first chapter examines the African American struggle for fair employment. But once the demands were made, once the laws were legislated, how did employers respond? Most historians have argued that they responded negatively. Many did. Others were more positive. I focus on those executives and managers at large corporations who experimented with hiring and advancing racial minorities into traditionally white positions in the 1940s, who tried to convince their peers to do the same in the 1950s, who adopted affirmative action plans in the 1960s, who hired and trained unemployed black youth in the 1970s, and who defended affirmative action in the 1980s.

Large corporations set the pace of racial integration in the workplace. Small businesses, which made up the majority of businesses in the United States, were slow to hire minorities and are not the subject of this study. The executives and managers I examine had leadership positions in major corporations that employed at least forty thousand workers, such as General Electric, Ford Motor Company, General Motors, Du Pont, International Harvester, IBM, Lockheed, RCA, and Control Data Corporation. Although large corporations represented less than 5 percent of all business enterprises in the United States, they had

(Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994); Paul Moreno, *From Direct Action to Affirmative Action: Fair Employment Law and Policy in America, 1933–1972* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997); Timothy Thurber, “Racial Liberalism, Affirmative Action, and the Troubled History of the President’s Committee on Government Contracts,” *Journal of Policy History* 18, no. 4 (2006): 446–75; Gavin Wright, “The Civil Rights Revolution as Economic History,” *Journal of Economic History* 59, no. 2 (June 1999): 267–89; William J. Collins, “The Labor Market Impact of Anti-Discrimination Laws, 1940–1960,” *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 56, no. 2 (January 2003): 244–72. On the conflicted role of labor, see Robert Zieger, *For Jobs and Freedom: Race and Labor in America since 1865* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2007); Paul Moreno, *Black Americans and Organized labor: A New History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006); Bruce Nelson, *Divided We Stand: American Workers and the Struggle for Black Equality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); and Terry Boswell et al., *Racial Competition and Class Solidarity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

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tremendous influence in society and over the business community. They positioned themselves as leaders in post-World War II economic life. They established prices, wages, and the pattern of union-management relations. They had the ear of the government, with whom they also held large military contracts. Because the heads of large corporations saw their organizations as engines of change, they were attentive to their public image and social obligations, which helps explain their tacit support for fair employment and, later, their quick compliance with the government's affirmative action requirements.¹⁰

Support for fair employment and equal opportunity was not located in one economic sector or industry but was expressed at different times for different reasons by a variety of actors across industries. Corporate liberals, business conservatives, manufacturers, industrialists, bankers, retailers, personnel managers, management experts, and even the leaders of the National Association of Manufacturers were among those who supported fair employment and equal employment opportunity for minorities beginning during World War II. The number of executives and managers willing to practice fair employment was very small at first, consisting of a few "pioneers." But it grew over time, so that by the 1960s, the climate of opinion among corporate executives, as among white people in general, was favorable to equal employment opportunity.¹¹ It would of course take much more than a favorable climate of opinion to change discriminatory employment practices, but a supportive atmosphere was a necessary precondition.

Chronologically, this book traces corporations' movement away from traditional policies of exclusion and segregation to the ostensibly color-blind policies of nondiscrimination (called "fair employment" or "equal employment opportunity") and then to proactive, color-conscious policies specifically designed to increase the number of racial minorities in traditionally white positions (known as "affirmative action"). Although initially skeptical of quotas, large employers of the late-1960s had little difficulty making the transition from color-blind proscriptions against discrimination to color-conscious strategies to hire minorities. This was in part because the ostensibly

¹⁰ On the defense of corporations as influential in even if not "representative" of American business, see Peter Drucker, *The New Society: The Anatomy of Industrial Order* (New York: Harper, 1949, 1950, paperback ed., 1962). See also Kim McQuaid, *Uneasy Partners: Big Business in American Politics, 1945-1990* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1994).

¹¹ See Stephen M. Gelber, *Black Men and Businessmen: The Growing Awareness of a Social Responsibility* (Port Washington, NY: Kennicat Press, 1974), 7-22. In June 1964, 67 percent of non-southern whites preferred a candidate who supported civil rights as opposed to one who did not, whereas 47 percent of all people interviewed thought the "racial problem" was the most important problem facing the country in 1964. See July 26 and July 29 in *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 1935-1970*, 3 vols. (New York: Random House, 1972), 2:1894.

color-blind policies of fair employment and equal employment opportunity already involved implicitly color-conscious strategies. But it was also the case that large employers felt a sense of relief to be done with the uncertainties of antidiscrimination policies, which were impossible to enforce because no one could define “discrimination,” and the policies themselves prohibited keeping racial statistics that could monitor progress. When the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and the Office of Federal Contract Compliance (OFCC) suggested that large employers worry less about discrimination and just start hiring minorities, integration became much easier.¹² The new focus on “results” was unambiguous; everyone knew what was expected. A corporation’s progress toward compliance could be quantified and measured in objective terms on which all sides could agree.

The firms I examine in the first part of the book were not typical. Their experiments in minority employment in the 1940s and 1950s were regarded as daring innovations. While the business community at large – its official spokesmen, its business and management schools, its publications – was open to the idea of fair employment and equal opportunity in the 1950s, few corporations actually took steps to integrate minorities into their firms unless they needed the labor. In business, as in other areas, no one wanted to disrupt the status quo. As one management consultant explained, “Most businessmen are not bigots, but they are cowards.”¹³ This is why the pioneering firms were so crucial to workplace integration – they provided a model, they took the first risky steps, they worked closely with the federal government to prove to others that it could be done. Within these pioneering corporations, there were particular individuals who made minority employment a priority. These executives and personnel directors were not heroes, not in the way that Fannie Lou Hamer, Robert Moses, or other activists who risked their lives daily were. But they were historical agents. They tried to make things happen, and to a large degree, they succeeded.

Executives who supported and practiced fair employment or equal employment opportunity in the 1940s and 1950s did not usually support federal legislation (although some did). They preferred voluntary methods for achieving integration, such as adopting and promoting antidiscrimination policies; establishing relationships with black colleges and institutions; desegregating

¹² In a meeting with National Association of Manufacturers officials, an OFCC official said that employers should focus on producing “results.” See “OFCC Equal Employment Opportunity Commission Compliance Efforts” (n.d. presumed 1968), p. 3, in National Association of Manufacturers, Records, 1895–1990 (hereafter NAM Records), Series 5, Box 64, Philadelphia Plan folder, HML. This will be discussed in Chapters 7 and 8.

¹³ Quoted in Gelber, *Black Men and Businessmen*, 81.

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facilities; educating white workers, managers, and executives about the principles of fair employment; hiring blacks into white positions; formulating strategies for integration; participating in studies of biracial employment; testifying on behalf of integration; and changing established employment patterns that inhibited integration. Civil rights historians have made support for antidiscrimination legislation a litmus test for a group's commitment to integration, often treating employers' preference for voluntary methods and education as a sign of *opposition* to fair employment and civil rights.¹⁴ While voluntary efforts may not have yielded immediate results, they were not merely obstructionist feints. They acclimated employers to the problems of discrimination and racism. They provided models for others to follow. They helped reshape attitudes. They laid the groundwork for integration so that when federal law finally required companies to integrate their workforces in 1964, many companies were not only prepared but willing to comply.

Indeed, the most surprising aspect of this story is how quickly large employers in the 1960s moved to comply with government orders to hire and advance minorities. By the mid-1960s, the heads of most major corporations professed a desire to end racial discrimination, were willing to cooperate with government enforcement officials, and had taken steps to target and train minorities for employment. Although there were corporations and executives who continued to resist hiring minorities, the dominant attitude had changed and the vocally recalcitrant became the outliers.

Executives' profession of support for equal employment opportunity and their adoption of affirmative action policies, however, did not mean that discrimination did not continue to occur at their firms. Like labor leaders, corporate heads who supported equal employment opportunity presided over organizations that had institutionalized discriminatory practices and that resisted change. What has been said of United Auto Workers (UAW) president Walter Reuther (that he was always glad to integrate anything except his own union) could easily have been said about any number of employers as well. We forget how mammoth an undertaking it was to undo institutionalized assumptions and practices that appeared to be "natural." It took a long time for employers and managers to actually see how traditional employment practices *were* discriminatory, and then they had to convince others to not only see discrimination but to end it, despite the adverse effects antidiscrimination measures

¹⁴ Examples can be found in MacLean, *Freedom Is Not Enough*, and Anthony Chen, "The Hitlerian Rule of Quotas: Racial Conservatism and the Politics of Fair Employment in New York State, 1941–45," *Journal of American History* 92, no. 4 (March 2006): 1238–64.

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could have on those being asked to change. Then, too, the pressure for employers to integrate occurred at the precise moment that the jobs most African Americans were best prepared to step into – semiskilled and production jobs – were disappearing because of automation or the movement of facilities out of cities. Integration was a Herculean task; that employers were not immediately successful is hardly surprising. Employers could adopt all of the experts' recommendations, including affirmative action, and still be unable to attain the desired goals. Thus, I am less interested in results than I am in the efforts.

This is not a story about liberal triumph, nor is it one of conservative backlash. The story of workplace integration confounds our assumptions about liberalism and conservatism. Both corporate liberals, who tended to accept unions and government activism, and business conservatives, who actively opposed unions and government activism, were favorably disposed to fair employment and even affirmative action. Indeed, the National Association of Manufacturers, a paragon of antiunion conservatism, urged its members to practice fair employment beginning during World War II and opposed the Reagan administration's attempts to prohibit affirmative action in the 1980s. Among businessmen, then, neither ideological demeanor nor political party indicated support for or against racial integration.

One reason corporations were not more averse to civil rights legislation and affirmative action was because it had the potential to disable unions. Policies and trends that were good for racial minorities tended to be bad for unions. The human relations in management movement is a case in point. Developed in the 1930s and 1940s, the human relations approach promised to curb industrial strife through such innovations as management training, formal employment procedures, and personnel offices. Human relations experts urged executives to let go of traditional laissez-faire principles and to be more socially responsible and sensitive to community needs. Although human relations advocates were sympathetic to workers, the employers who adopted their methods were not. Indeed, many historians regard human relations managerial techniques as fundamentally antiunion.¹⁵ Nonetheless, human relations techniques were necessary to – and strengthened by – racial integration in the workplace.

Labor unions themselves had a mixed history with regard to racial integration. After a century of exclusionary policies and a sprinkling of failed biracial organizing attempts, American unions actively began to include blacks in the

¹⁵ I will fully discuss the issue in Chapter 4. In the meantime, see Sanford Jacoby, *Modern Manors: Welfare Capitalism since the New Deal* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), and Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945–1960* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

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1930s, under the leadership of the Congress of Industrial Unions (CIO). But while CIO leaders endorsed nondiscriminatory policies, the union membership was sometimes slow to follow. The craft unions in the American Federation of Labor (AFL) were even less inclined to accept blacks. While the CIO's industrial unions had a practical reason to include blacks (excluded blacks could provide employers with a nonunion source of labor), the AFL's elite craft unions, whose power rested on their restriction of the skilled labor market, stood to lose this advantage if they allowed blacks in. Quite apart from issues of membership, union practices that were intended to strengthen unions' position vis-à-vis management (such as apprenticeships, seniority lines, and the closed shop) hurt blacks and institutionalized their exclusion from skilled positions.¹⁶

Even when union leadership fully endorsed the idea of equal employment opportunity, the interests of racial minorities and the interests of labor unions were often at odds. The Wagner Act (1935) protected workers' right to choose their own representation, but when white workers chose to be represented by exclusionary unions, blacks were eased out of jobs they had long held in an open shop or were excluded from any future employment.¹⁷ Seniority was good for unions but usually worked against minorities seeking advancement. During the years that unions' power declined, the fortunes of minorities rose. Large corporations laid off thousands of union workers during the economic downturn of the 1970s but retained or increased the percentage of minority workers in jobs not covered by union seniority clauses. In the early 1970s, a time of recession, Lockheed Aircraft Corporation increased the number of minority workers in every nonunion category.¹⁸ I am not suggesting a causal relationship between the decline of unions and the rise of affirmative action, but I am noting a historical pattern that provides context for employers' acceptance of affirmative action.

¹⁶ The literature on blacks and unions is voluminous. Start with the following: Zieger, *For Jobs and Freedom*; Moreno, *Black Americans and Organized Labor*; Nelson, *Divided We Stand*; and Herbert Hill, *Black Labor and the American Legal System: Race, Work and Law* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), originally published by the Bureau of National Affairs, Inc., 1977.

¹⁷ See Moreno, *Black Americans and Organized Labor*, 167; Robin D. G. Kelley and Earl Lewis, *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 415; and Hill, *Black Labor and the American Legal System*, originally published by the Bureau of National Affairs, 1977, p. 102. Eric Arneson notes that the Wagner Act's failure to include an antiexclusion clause did not totally eliminate blacks from the railroad industry. See Arneson, *Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

¹⁸ "Acting Affirmatively to End Job Bias," *BusinessWeek*, January 27, 1975, 94.

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The rise of affirmative action in the 1970s and 1980s corresponded not only to the decline of unionism but also to the decline of liberalism. Historians often view the Reagan-era backlash against affirmative action as the end of affirmative action, as if the backlash were successful. But the backlash against affirmative action occurred in the political arena, not the corporate boardroom. While large employers cheered the Reagan administration's antiunionism and antiliberalism, they opposed the attempt to curtail and prohibit affirmative action. Though politically disabled, affirmative action survived and thrived in the corporate world under a new name – "diversity." Major corporations held on to their affirmative action programs, now justified as a means to maintain the diversity deemed crucial to success in a global marketplace. In 2003, the heads of major corporations submitted briefs on behalf of the University of Michigan's affirmative action policies. Affirmative action in college admissions was different from affirmative action in employment, yet corporate heads understood the crucial link between the two, arguing that diversity in education was necessary both to fulfill their manpower needs and to prepare students for a diverse workplace. *BusinessWeek* called the Supreme Court's decision in *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003) to uphold Michigan's race-conscious admissions policy a victory for corporate America. Given the disappearance of unions and the dismantling of the welfare state, however, the triumph of affirmative action and diversity in the corporate world can hardly be considered a victory for liberalism. Nor can it be seen as a victory for conservatives, who, after all, opposed affirmative action. The survival of affirmative action is best seen as a victory for employers, who, after years of negotiation and compliance, finally regained control over the social and racial changes that had first disrupted traditional employment policies back in the 1940s.¹⁹

The focus of this study is racial integration. When a southern congressman inserted "sex" into the list of categories in which discrimination was prohibited in Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the struggle for racial integration became merged with the struggle for gender equality and historians have since combined race and gender in their studies of workplace integration. It is true that the segregated, subordinate position of women of all races in the workplace resembled that of African American men. Just as there was "white work" and "black work," there was "men's work" and "women's work." But before 1964, the two struggles, while related, had separate histories. Black women, of course, fought both struggles simultaneously, but to the extent that

¹⁹ On corporations' embrace of affirmative action, see John D. Skrentny, *The Minority Rights Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Anderson, *The Pursuit of Fairness*; "Don't Scuttle Affirmative Action," *BusinessWeek*, April 15, 1985, 174; and "Businessmen Prefer Affirmative Action Goals," *Fortune*, September 16, 1985, 26.