



## Welcome to Montgomery

*Revisiting the birth of affirmative action*

**I**T WAS A GENUINELY CHEERING bit of history recently, when George Wallace took part in the thirtieth anniversary of the civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery. This was the man who had once called out snarling dogs on black marchers, who once stood in front of the schoolhouse door to stop blacks from attending the University of Alabama. And now here he was, holding hands with blacks, singing "We Shall Overcome."

The place was Montgomery, Alabama, where some two hundred participants gathered this past March 10. They were there to commemorate the marchers who, on that day thirty years earlier, tried to take their demands for black voting rights to the door of then-Governor Wallace. The marchers in 1965 were turned back by state troopers wielding clubs and tear gas.

Wallace, now seventy-five, pain-wracked and in a wheelchair since he was shot in 1972, said to the Montgomery crowd this spring, "Much has transpired since those days. A great deal has been lost and a great deal has been gained, and here we are. My message to you today is welcome to Montgomery."

As the nation rolls up its sleeves to battle about affirmative action, I find this a hopeful tale for our time. It's useful to reflect back to an even more polarized era, and to see that out of the most bitter of confrontations, healing can come.

Even for those who remember the 1960s, it's hard to grasp how ordinary were the rights blacks sought: the right to sit up front on a city bus, to eat at a drugstore lunch counter, to be considered for jobs. And it's shameful to remember how violently whites resisted. On buses, Freedom Riders were beaten and dragged to their "rightful" places. When Birmingham merchants dared in 1962 to remove signs designating restrooms and water fountains for "colored" and "white," city inspectors threatened to close down the stores, and white customers canceled their charge accounts.

The conflicts weren't limited to the South. After the six-day Watts riot of 1965 in Los Angeles, there were three summers of more than one hundred riots—most of the them in the North.

George Wallace helped inflame this racial hatred. But even before his appearance at the recent commemoration march, he had begun reaching out for forgiveness. In 1979, he appeared at Martin Luther King's former church in Montgomery, and told the congregation, "I have learned what suffering means." As Stephen Leshner recounts in *George Wallace: American Populist*, Wallace said then, "In a way that was impossible before [the shooting], I think I can understand something



**Governor George Wallace, left, makes his famous "stand in the schoolhouse door" to stop federal agents from enrolling two blacks at the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, in 1963.**

aside programs for small, minority-owned firms passed the House by a vote of 425-0. But the November elections changed all that. In March, an apparently routine government auction of telecommunications rights turned into a major fracas over affirmative action, when a white-owned firm challenged set-asides as unconstitutional. Now affirmative action is under fierce attack in Congress.

There's a new charge in the air. In conversations lately, I hear talk of how a white man missed out on a job because a black person or a woman was needed to fill some quota. I hear talk that the best candidates are not being hired. And I fear a growing new consensus that white men are being asked to pay a painful price, for crimes committed by someone else.

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**In reexamining affirmative action, we should focus not on justice but on caring.**

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This claim that affirmative action is unfair frames the issue as one of justice. But there's another issue here, and that is caring. Sometimes an ethics of compassion requires us to extend special treatment to those in need—and quite deliberately *not* to treat everyone the same. I think, for example, of the biblical parable of the lost sheep, and how the

shepherd left the flock of ninety-nine to go in search of the one lost.

Affirmative action may not be perfect, but it's still needed. An Urban Institute study a few years ago, for example, found that discrimination against blacks in hiring outweighed reverse discrimination by three-to-one. The real question is not whether this or that provision of affirmative action is "going too far," but whether we can feel the pain of those different from ourselves. It was George Wallace's own pain that led him to compassion. Perhaps other white men today are called to a similar journey: to experience what it's like to be disregarded because of the color of your skin, or your gender—and through that experience to come not to bitterness but to compassion. ☩