

Ironic Icon: A Review of
Ward Connerly's *Creating Equal: My Fight Against Race Preferences*

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By his own admission in his book *Creating Equal*, Ward Connerly is thin-skinned, fears rejection, and is stubborn. Such traits served him well both in life and in his quest to end affirmative action. However, they may not be the traits upon which a society relies when shaping public policy because they easily lend themselves to distortions of reality. *Creating Equal* is a *tour de force* in which Ward Connerly demonstrates a remarkable skill at conveying such traditional all-American ideals as equality, fairness or justice. In doing so, he emphasizes personal responsibility and individual achievement as the only things that *should* count toward one's advancement in a just society. Unfortunately, the idealistic color-blind society he envisions also requires one to turn a completely blind-eye to the reality of inequality in American life, much of it based in economics and with a disproportionate impact on racial minorities.

Connerly's view would render the idea of race as meaningless. Indeed, in a scientific sense the notion of race is largely discredited. The original scientific concept of race defined the term as a group who shared a common gene pool and a common ancestry distinct from others. It was assumed that differences in outward appearance represented genetic differences. Yet, recent advances in DNA mapping demonstrate that humans all over the world share the same ancestry and that genetically we are over 99.9 percent the same. There are more differences *within* any one group of people, including the so-called races, than there are *between* groups of people. Yet, race as a social construct remains powerful, even though what it actually represents can be little more than group-based traditions, habits and preferences. Connerly's early life in Louisiana, Washington state, and finally California serve as a testament to the power that the social construct of race wields in shaping one's life. One of many ironies revealed in *Creating Equal* is that

despite Connerly's numerous successes in later life, and his desire to make it meaningless, race continued an ungainly influence. Connerly's life, like that of so many other blacks, was heavily influenced by the interplay of race and economics. But other factors also contributed to the man he ultimately became and these factors include a fear of rejection, a consequent need to be accepted and to belong to something, and a keen awareness of the arbitrariness that is life.

Creating Equal describes Connerly's early life which began in Louisiana and was marked by the abandonment of his natural father when he was only about two years old. His mother, who apparently had been physically abused by Connerly's father, re-married, but died about a year later, when Connerly was only four. Connerly then went to live with his grandmother as his legal guardian, but at age five she sent him to live with an Aunt in Washington state and that family shortly after moved to Sacramento, California. His grandmother eventually moved to Sacramento as well and when Connerly was about eleven, she required that he come to live with her. Such disruptions underscored for Connerly a certain arbitrariness to life and also fueled a lifelong sense of rejection and insecurity. At age fifteen, Connerly accompanied his aunt and uncle on a long automobile trip from California to Mississippi. This experience provided the opportunity for him to witness Jim Crow practices up close as well as the fear that they engendered. Indeed, one of Connerly's stark memories of the trip was his aunt remarking on more than one occasion that they could be killed for simply saying the wrong thing or otherwise not observing the absurd strictures of Jim Crow Mississippi. It is quite understandable that the experience caused young Connerly to develop an interest in avoiding such occasions in his future. It is considerably less understandable how an otherwise perceptive young

man could be dumbfounded by references made by his relatives to evidence of common racial discrimination of the day, such as illustrated by a passage revealing young

Connerly's reaction to a comment made by his uncle James with whom he lived (p. 40):

In the years I'd lived with him, James had tried to pass on his moral code to me in indirect ways... Like other uneducated people, he was convinced that achievement in school was the key that unlocked one's future. "You go and get yourself an education," he would say when I complained about homework. "They can't take an education away from you." I didn't know who "they" were or why they would consider coming to take a little learning away from me, but I never questioned him.

The passage shows that although his closest relatives recognized the insidiousness of racial discrimination, as did virtually all blacks of thinking age in the 1950s, Connerly chose to suppress the reality of its presence as well as its source. A similar blind spot was evidenced by Connerly when he revealed that he didn't learn to swim until he was 25 years old. The reason was that *in high school* a racist teacher had told him that blacks could not swim (p. 58).

I was never one to be on the lookout for racism; in fact, I probably missed expressions of it that were obvious to others. But I always thought that Chavoor didn't like the black students at Grant [High School]. Mr. Chavoor made no secret of his prejudices, one of them being the belief that blacks were incapable of being good swimmers. He once told me when I said I wanted to be a swimmer that I'd better not because I would "sink like a rock." When I asked him why, he replied, "Because Negroes are built for running, not swimming."... Thanks to Sherman Chavoor, it wasn't until I was twenty-five years old that I finally went to the YMCA to force myself to learn to swim in case my young child fell in the pool of the apartment complex where we were then living.

One is left to ponder how an otherwise smart young man could accept such an obviously absurd comment made by someone he considered racist and even to internalize it until he was 25 years old. Did he never look around him and see blacks swimming in pools or at beaches? For a man who finds racism so abhorrent, Connerly's life story demonstrates a surprisingly uncritical acceptance of false race-based beliefs and stereotypes. Perhaps this contributed to Connerly, and his family members, often being estranged from others in the black community, and sometimes even subjected to taunts or ridicule. What these events from his earlier life have in common is that they all served to inflict emotional scars that led him to feel insecure, fearful, and isolated, even from fellow blacks, but also prodded him to want be different from those around him and to be independent.

The book suggests that in an effort to be independent as well as in reaction to relations with other blacks, Connerly developed a palpable disdain for various categories of black people which is demonstrated throughout the book, perhaps the most obvious being those he labels "civil rights professionals." But another example is seen in Connerly's characterization of black funerals as "pandemonium." In contrast, I've attended many black funerals and always found them to be sorrowful, deeply emotional affairs, but never pandemonium. Perhaps Connerly *has* experienced something at black funerals that I have not, nevertheless this gross overgeneralization is symptomatic of *Creating Equal* and amounts to an insult to an entire race regarding one of life's most personal and emotionally wrenching of events. In fact, the book's literary technique consists almost entirely of providing vignettes from Connerly's life, followed by a brief summary paragraph in which he editorializes against affirmative action, against liberals, against intellectuals, and against blacks, usually without much in the way of supporting

evidence than his own invective. Such an approach makes for provocative, but unenlightening reading. The book provides revealing historical insights into Connerly's person as well as his well-known positions on affirmative action. But the book is tinged with bitterness, an us-versus-them didactic, and *ad hominen* broadsides which only detract from the kind of high road he purports to present about the nature of human relations.

Yet another example of Connerly's quest to escape from things black is demonstrated by his choice to join a white fraternity in college rather than one of the historically black ones. The desire to break numerous race-based social barriers was common in the sixties and in this regard his choice may be considered admirable. But his conclusion that his presence as the lone black in an otherwise all-white fraternity made that fraternity ethnically diverse is mere wishful thinking. Even today, some thirty years later, fraternities along with churches, remain some of the most segregated of gatherings in our society. Interestingly, Connerly had to admit to "Mom" that as a successful businessman he did not attend church; too busy, he said. But one wonders whether, having been raised in a church-going home, the reality of strictly voluntary racially segregated worship services was too much for him to endure and too much of a reminder that the segregation of his youth still existed, even in church.

A particularly ironic aspect of the book is Connerly's eagerness to embrace the idea that blacks receiving even a modicum of government assistance are inferior. This is an odd conceptualization coming from a man whose career received assistance from a powerful political ally and who makes a very good living selling access and assistance to businesses seeking government contracts. It would appear that there is nothing wrong

with providing assistance and even selling it. Of course, this is an oversimplification of Connerly's business and does not detract from the real work that goes into it. But on some level there has to be an acknowledgement that affirmative steps to help people gain leverage against the competition is as American as apple pie. Indeed, many people are willing to pay Connerly for just such insider's assistance in procuring government contracts.

Much of *Creating Equal* is devoted to the discussion of affirmative action or more pointedly to Connerly's opposition to it. In fact, although I disagree with his views on affirmative action, I found his discussion concerning the end of affirmative action at University of California campuses to be one of the books most incisive chapters. Here Connerly is very effective, though one-sided, in demonstrating his logic and ethos for ending affirmative action in college admissions. At the same time he portrays his opponents so unflatteringly that they seem not only powerless, but also insipid, even pitiable for their views. This image of affirmative action proponents is developed further as Connerly magnifies his disdain for them and asserts that it is indicative of how America in general feels. In fact, this imagery is a central component by which Connerly represents his own opposition to affirmative action as being little more than a cog in a vast grassroots movement for which he merely served as spokesman. But this image is put to lie by other evidence Connerly brazenly offers later in the book. For example, although Connerly and his supporters represented their opposition to affirmative action as being a "grass-roots" effort, he detailed how in reality theirs was a professionally orchestrated effort to collect signatures for petitions against affirmative action (p. 223):

The signature-gathering company John hired contracted with another firm to bring in what are called "horses" from other states. Predominantly blacks and Hispanics, these "horses" are paid up to \$20 an hour.

Thus, what was presented as a grass-roots voter initiative, was in reality a heavily bank-rolled business effort that employed out-of-staters chosen to make it look as if blacks and Hispanics were spearheading the initiative. Such professional signature collections, funded by people like Steve Forbes, can hardly be described as "grass roots" in my book.

Creating Equal leaves one with the impression of a man tormented by race; a man raised by a prideful family that sought to distance itself from what it considered unsavory elements in the black community, only to be ridiculed for their failing effort to do so. Connerly viewed himself as being of mixed racial background, and seems to have felt that some recognition was due that fact. Instead, the fact itself went completely unrecognized by all who saw him, whether they were black or white. It is as if he constantly screamed at the top of his lungs that he was different from other blacks, yet the effort was met by stoic silence from a world which offered no exception for him. In the end, *Creating Equal* is a book full paradoxes:

- It is the story of a black man who takes the lead in seeking to end efforts, whether public or private, to level the economic playing field which historically has been stacked against equal opportunity for blacks in particular and minorities in general.
- It is the story of a man who is adept at appropriating the images and symbols of equality and freedom, but who employs them to promote exclusion.

- It is the story of a man strong on American populism and idealism, but disingenuous, even deceptive, about America's past, the enduring effects of racial discrimination, and how to ameliorate those effects.

Perhaps the ultimate irony is epitomized by the last paragraph of the *Creating Equal* in which Connerly asks bookstore owners not to put the book in the African American section. Of course, that is precisely where I found it and this fact begs the question: where else does it belong?

Reference:

Connerly, Ward (2000) *Creating Equal: My Fight Against Race Preferences*.
San Francisco, CA: Encounter Books