

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

*In the film, Black and Blue, you learned about the dilemma President Ford faced when his teammate, Willis Ward, was benched during a football game simply because of the color of his skin. This event caused the bond between the two friends to become even stronger and further fueled President Ford's passion for civil rights in America. President Ford went on to support the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, Title IX, and presided over the first official Black History Month. Below is an article written by President Ford in 1999 regarding affirmative action. Read the article and respond to the questions that follow.*



### **Inclusive America, Under Attack**

By Gerald R. Ford

The New York Times, Sunday, August 8, 1999

Of all the triumphs that have marked this as America's century -- breathtaking advances in science and technology, the democratization of wealth and dispersal of political power in ways hardly imaginable in 1899 -- none is more inspiring, if incomplete, than our pursuit of racial justice. The milestones include Theodore Roosevelt's inviting Booker T. Washington to dine at the White House, Harry Truman's desegregating the armed forces, Dwight Eisenhower's using Federal troops to integrate Little Rock's Central High School and Lyndon Johnson's electrifying the nation by standing before Congress in 1965 and declaring, "We shall overcome."

I came by my support of that year's Voting Rights Act naturally. Thirty years before Selma, I was a University of Michigan senior, preparing with my Wolverine teammates for a football game against visiting Georgia Tech. Among the best players on that year's Michigan squad was Willis Ward, a close friend of mine whom the Southern school reputedly wanted dropped from our roster because he was black. My classmates were just as adamant that he should take the field. In the end, Willis decided on his own not to play.

His sacrifice led me to question how educational administrators could capitulate to raw prejudice. A university, after all, is both a preserver of tradition and a hotbed of innovation. So long as books are kept open we tell ourselves, minds can never be closed.

But doors, too, must be kept open. Tolerance, breadth of mind and appreciation for the world beyond our neighborhoods: these can be learned on the football field and in the science lab as well as in the lecture hall. But only if students are exposed to America in all her variety.

For the class of '35, such educational opportunities were diminished by the relative scarcity of African-Americans, women and various ethnic groups on campus. I have often wondered how different the world might have been in the 1940's, 50's and 60's -- how much more humane and just -- if my generation had experienced a more representative sampling of the American family. That the indignities visited on Willis Ward would be unimaginable in today's Ann Arbor is a measure of how far we have come toward realizing however belatedly the promises we made to each other in declaring our nationhood and professing our love of liberty.

And yet. In the last speech of his life, Lyndon Johnson reminded us of how much unfinished work remained. "To be black in a white society is not to stand on level and equal ground," he said. "While the races may stand side by side, whites stand on history's mountain and blacks stand in history's hollow. Until we overcome unequal history, we cannot overcome unequal opportunity."

Like so many phrases that have become political buzzwords, affirmative action means different things to different people. Practically speaking, it runs the gamut from mandatory quotas, which the Supreme Court has ruled are clearly unconstitutional, to mere lip service, which is just as clearly unacceptable.

At its core, affirmative action should try to offset past injustices by fashioning a campus population more truly reflective of modern America and our hopes for the future. Unfortunately, a pair of lawsuits brought against my alma mater pose a threat to such diversity. Not content to oppose formal quotas, plaintiffs suing the University of Michigan would prohibit that and other universities from even considering race as one of many factors weighed by admission counselors.

So drastic a ban would scuttle Michigan's current system one that takes into account nearly a dozen elements -- race, economic standing, geographic origin, athletic and artistic achievement among them -- to create the finest educational environment for all students.



This eminently reasonable approach, as thoughtful as it is fair, has produced a student body with a significant minority component whose record of academic success is outstanding.

Times of change are times of challenge. It is estimated that by 2030, 40 percent of all Americans will belong to various racial minorities. Already the global economy requires unprecedented grasp of diverse viewpoints and cultural traditions. I don't want future college students to suffer the cultural and social impoverishment that afflicted my generation. If history has taught us anything in this remarkable century, it is the notion of America as a work in progress.

Do we really want to risk turning back the clock to an era when the Willis Wards were isolated and penalized for the color of their skin, their economic standing or national ancestry?

To eliminate a constitutional affirmative action policy would mock the inclusive vision Carl Sandburg had in mind when he wrote: "The Republic is a dream. Nothing happens unless first a dream." Lest we forget: America remains a nation with have-nots as well as haves. Its government is obligated to provide for hope no less than for the common defense.

*Source: <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/speeches/990808.asp>*

### **Think About It!**

Use the following questions and prompts to have a class discussion, or write your own responses on a separate sheet of paper.

1. President Ford describes his generation as having been afflicted by "cultural and social impoverishment". He wonders how life in the 40's, 50's, and 60's may have been different if his generation was exposed to a "more representative sampling of the American family". What do you think? If civil rights initiatives had been enacted earlier how do you think these decades could have been different?
2. President Ford states, "Tolerance, breadth of mind and appreciation for the world beyond our neighborhoods: these can be learned on the football field and in the science lab as well as in the lecture hall. But only if students are exposed to America in all her variety." Interpret this statement. Are some of the lessons you learn in school about more than just academics? Are students at a disadvantage when they are not exposed to diversity?
3. President Lyndon Johnson is quoted in this article as saying, "To be black in a white society is not to stand on level and equal ground... Until we overcome unequal history, we cannot overcome unequal opportunity." Do you think this statement is still true today? Do you feel there is still a need for affirmative action, in some form, to exist?