

Dave Shiflett

# Rocky Mountain Hire

*Supporters of "diversity" talk about their mission in terms of "equality" and "fairness," when what they mean is that white men need not apply. One white man's story from his rocky tenure at Denver's Rocky Mountain News.*



**A**ffirmative action is much written about in the abstract, but how does it really work? Ruth Shalit, who holds the Molly Ivins chair in Acceptable Plagiarism at the *New Republic*, recently reported in that magazine that race-conscious policies at the *Washington Post* may place incompetent minorities in jobs they shouldn't have, and that the paper trims its coverage in sensitive areas for the purpose of reducing racial tensions. This has been

denied by *Post* management and a sizable group of company valets, but there is little dispute that preferential policies cause tension and nervousness in the staff, as race-based policies are bound to do.

Yet these complaints, which are common throughout society, don't really matter. Affirmative action is deeply embedded in American life, and those who speak against it are no more welcome in boardrooms than preachers at a keg party. Supreme Court decisions will not affect voluntary attempts to hire and promote minorities and women. Complaints by blacks that white girls with Vassar diplomas should not be considered their equals in victimization (which they surely shouldn't) will not change the ability of privileged women to step to the front of the line. And whining by white males, as Justice Clarence Thomas has made clear, is both useless

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and embarrassing. So best to sit back and enjoy the discrimination as much as possible—which is not so hard as it sounds. Watching management devising and implementing affirmative action plans can be as amusing as watching dancing bears being trained to roller skate.

What follows is a snapshot of how such policies work at the *Rocky Mountain News*, the flagship paper of the historically conservative Scripps-Howard newspaper

chain and, from time to time, the twenty-fifth largest circulation daily newspaper in the United States. Scripps-Howard's company-wide editorial policy opposes mandated affirmative action plans, and its hiring and promotion policies may well be less punitive than most. Nonetheless, they are blatantly discriminatory.

For purposes of disclosure, this correspondent, who is white as a bleached skull, worked at the *Rocky Mountain News* for nearly six years, leaving recently for Virginia and self-employment.

**N**ewspaper management nowadays is not only interested in changing the racial composition of its workforce. It is also determined to change characteristics that are much more than skin-deep. Robert Friedman writes of life at the *St. Petersburg Times*, where employees are subjected to harrowing mind-stretching techniques:

My bosses sent me off to Management Boot Camp a couple of weeks ago. We spent the first day outdoors, frolicking in the woods and developing a new sense of self-reliance and camaraderie with fellow employees in other departments of the newspaper.

We did this through a series of games and exercises that involved a lot of touching and being touched by strangers. A burly man from the Circulation Department sat in my lap. The exercise may have boosted the newspaper's circulation in some indirect way, but it didn't help mine. Later, I passed a roll of toilet tissue to a female editor in the Clearwater office. With my teeth.

This is fully humiliating, though maybe not as bad as being denied the opportunity to work for racial reasons, which was clearly the desire behind a memo by former *Rocky* Managing Editor Mike Finney, which, like the other documents quoted in this story, was widely distributed through the paper's white male *samizdat* network:

The job reviews of supervisors and others involved in hiring should address race and sex. Each review should have a hiring goal of at least half of our hires being women and at least half non-white. For example, if we have ten hires, this goal can be met by hiring five Hispanic women. It could also be met by hiring five white women and five black, Hispanic, or American Indian men.

Clearly, this particular "goal" would be most successfully met if not one of the hires were a white male. While this plan was theoretical and did not target people already working, its message was clear enough—and especially chilling in a time of newspaper industry downsizing. A similar message was contained in an electronic memo, which was sent through the *Rocky's* computer system, by the senior-ranking female editor on the news staff. The memo went so far as to suggest that it might be time for the paper's white males to consider other professional activities, which sent one white male columnist into the author's office in a rage. While these sorts of messages no doubt create a "hostile work environment," it is pointless to confront any one editor or senior manager when feelings are hurt. All managers are compelled to go along. There is no alternative.

Affirmative action supporters are fond of pointing out that America's management class remains white male territory, and thus will not be changed without government-backed arm twisting. The underlying assumption is that white males are uniquely hostile to race-based remedies. This assumption, though perfectly reasonable

(indeed, it could be argued that persons not hostile to policies that single them out for discrimination are sort of crazy), is perfectly false.

Indeed, there are many white male managers who have made a mission out of implementing affirmative action plans, whether Gannett's odious Al Neuharth or the *Rocky's* quite pleasant Larry Strutton, whose various titles include publisher, president, and chief executive officer of the *Rocky Mountain News*. A gregarious fellow with a winning smile, Strutton worked his way up from the *Rocky's* composing room, left Denver for high jobs at several prominent papers, and returned to command the *Rocky* in its fight with the *Denver Post*. His passion for affirmative action was made clear early on in a company publication. Strutton's message was headlined, "Valuing Diversity—*Rocky Mountain News* Creates a Win-Win Situation":

When I returned to the *News* after spending about nine years at several other newspapers, I looked around at the executive meetings and said, "We're all white males and there's something wrong with this picture." I'd had a wonderful experience in Detroit, where the black population in the city limits is much higher than the white population; in Los Angeles, where we had a heavy Hispanic population and a lot of Hispanic employees; and

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Baltimore, where we had a nice mix. I didn't see that here, so I felt we needed to take aggressive steps toward improving that.

Strutton, alas, did not begin righting old wrongs by handing over his own job to a deserving minority or woman. Instead he took the more common step of instituting a series of re-education sessions entitled "Diversity 2000," whose purpose he explained in his article: "If you start adding a greater percentage of diversity to the workforce without giving people exposure as to what it's about and why it's important, you build up a lot of resentment and a lot of 'us against them' feelings. The wonderful thing about this program is that it is win-win. It is good for the company and good for employees."

This sort of pep-talking is a mainstay of corporate life, yet the more Strutton talked, the more suspicious some white males became that his win-win policy would lead to their professional stagnation. Suspicions reached a high point when Strutton delivered a small speech at the conclusion of one diversity training session, later recalled by a white male attendee: "Strutton came in and began telling us how white males had all the advantages

throughout history, and how that was going to change. He said white males should not plan on advancing as readily as we might hope: If he had a white male candidate and a woman and/or minority shooting for the same job, he would hire and promote one of the latter because, he said, it is the right thing to do. Here's a guy with my future in his hands telling me and all other white guys that he's going to actively discriminate against us because of our race and sex. It was like he believed we were guilty of racial crimes."

This particular employee also recalled Strutton's closing line: "If this makes white males nervous, maybe they ought to be nervous."

**W**ell, maybe they ought to be, and not only because their boss had promised to hold them back whenever possible. There were other crusaders pushing the idea that white males not only benefited from an evil type of nepotism, but were actually bad for business. This notion was at the heart of another internal reform agency known as the Task Force on Women (TFW). According to the TFW, white males are responsible for declining circulation—a serious charge at any newspaper and especially at the *Rocky*, where, on Strutton's watch, the Sunday lead over the rival *Denver Post*, and much of the daily lead, has been lost.

Polls do show that female newspaper readership is off nationwide: two decades ago, 78 percent of women said they read the paper every day, while only 60 percent do now. (Why female readership has declined at a time when more women than ever are writing for newspapers is a question better left for another day.)

The *Rocky's* reform strategy took the paper on a new course that overturned a few historic journalistic credos. Most notable was in the composition of the TFW, whose mission it was to determine how to make the paper more "female friendly." Not only was the TFW made up of women who worked in various professions other than journalism. Many of them were political activists from such groups as Colorado NARAL and the Colorado Women's Agenda, while others were actually sitting politicians: state representatives, city council members, judges, and high-ranking aides to the governor and mayor. This came as a strange development to some traditionalists, who had been taught to keep politicians at arm's length. Now the politicians were being invited in to help direct the newspaper's coverage. The direction such changes would go was never in question.

The political nature of the undertaking was reflected in Strutton's greeting to TFW participants, which began

by a retelling of that traumatic day at an executive meeting when he "looked around and said, 'It's all male and it's all white.'" He then assured participants that his actions were not appreciated by the old guard:

"Quite frankly, I am sure this has a lot of people in the newsroom nervous—especially the senior people. One of the things you quickly learn when you start talking about diversity is that it is extremely threatening to some people. White men are concerned that they won't get fair opportunities to get promoted or hired. They are afraid that what happened to women and minorities for years will happen to them."

Having promised as much, and also having implicitly endorsed the notion that white males were alienating female readers, Strutton took his bows and left it to the task force to straighten out the mess. A partial list of the paper's shortcomings was included in the minutes of the TFW's June 1, 1994 meeting:

- Women are routinely overlooked as experts in stories.
- There is an anti-woman sentiment in many stories and editorials.
- The cultural sentiment that males "do" and females "serve" is pervasive.
- Major news stories rarely address how an event or issue might affect women.
- Stereotypical descriptive labels are attached to women. Women are often introduced in stories as "attractive." The label "obese" needs to be used with great caution.

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A summing up of the editorial page's sins was contained in an internal task force document tallying members' complaints. It fell under the general rubric "Editorial page is biased, too conservative, and not balanced." Its sins? "Anti-pro-choice (most recurring theme)," "pro-family values," "only liberal women roasted," "very narrow," "very male (often repeated theme)," "sarcastic about women," "hostile to women," "hostile to progressive ideas."

Whether the TFW will improve the paper is uncertain, but it has certainly changed it. For one thing, task force participants began turning up in puff pieces about Denver's movers and shakers. "One Sunday magazine cover had pictures of about a dozen women," recalls one task force dissident. "About half of them had been on the task force."

Routine readers also noticed a heightened interest in getting the "female" view into the news. Reader Mike O'Grady was inspired to respond to a July 4 article in which honored members of the community were asked to describe "A Wish for America." Observed Mr. O'Grady:

The group included a globalist theology professor, a liberal lawyer, a businessman wanting cultural respect, a cab driver wishing for the good old days, and a science-fiction author wanting peace, freedom, and prosperity. . . . Interestingly, the balance of the group was made up of three high-ranking leaders in women's organizations espousing their wish that more women would take over "leadership" positions in this nation. The article, written by four female reporters, appears to be another typical news media spin that Americans have grown accustomed to seeing.

**A**nother sign that management is prepared to take "aggressive steps" to reduce the presence and influence of white men is seen in the *Rocky*'s new hiring and promotion policies. These new policies actually insert members of yet another special interest group—the Diversity Task Force (DTF)—into the interviewing and hiring process.

A memorandum from the paper's vice president for labor and human resources explained the new policy: DTF members would sit in on interview sessions, where they would participate "by asking questions that will increase cultural awareness." They would also "contribute to the discussion of the candidates' personal and professional strengths and weaknesses, particularly by addressing ethnic or cultural traits that might otherwise be misunderstood." In other words, from here on out, a political officer with a serious interest in not furthering the prospects of any white male applicants would be present at interviews.

Managers were warned not to take lightly the presence of DTF members. Among the instructions handed down were two of particular note:

After interviews with all finalists are completed, the representative of the Diversity Task Force who participated in the interview shall be included in the formal discussion of the candidates that leads to the employment decision.

Any minority employee who applies for transfer within the company but is not selected to fill the position shall receive a letter from either the department head involved in the employment decision, or the vice president to whom the department head reports, and/or from the Human Resources Department representative involved in the employment

decision, stating the reason/s the minority employee was not selected for the position and specifying skills, training, or experience required to enable that employee to be a more qualified candidate for transfer and advancement in the future.

If that were not enough incentive to choose the minority candidate, the memo ends on this riveting note:

Twenty-five percent of the [managers'] bonus of each vice president and department head involved in employment decisions shall be dependent on their adherence to the procedures of this program and the company's overall progress toward achieving the program's objectives.



In other words, failure to discriminate will endanger a manager's pocketbook and career.

What's it like to have a run-in with a Diversity Task Force member? It happens that this correspondent once collided with one of its leading lights. The controversy arose over a short item that must be presented in its entirety in order to understand the DTF mindset. The quip came at the end of a signed editorial summing up the week's most prominent stupidities:

Meanwhile, authorities in San Francisco say at least 169 Chinese were dumped near the Golden Gate recently. "It's all part and parcel of a master scheme," said an immigration official. "We have information that there are

dozens of [Chinese smuggling] ships out there."

Man the battle stations. The hordes have arrived.

To many adult readers, the point of this editorial was clear enough. The immigration officials were overreacting. They were being mocked.

Yet this lighthearted quip was completely misinterpreted by our task force member, who responded to the brief item with a memo of several thousand heated words. Let us call the complainant Ms. Fong, for that is her name, and sample the tenor of her protest:

While it's not necessarily clear that the Chinese who are coming here are doing so for political or economic rea-

sons, I feel it is hardly fair for you to characterize them as some sort of special threat which must be dealt with. . . . If you actually talked to any Chinese immigrant, you will find that taking over this country is not a high priority with them. Making a better life for themselves is paramount among their concerns, but that was the goal of most of the immigrants who come to the U.S. If you have concerns generally about the influx of immigrants, then say so.

Ms. Fong, if we may interrupt her harangue, is dead wrong on this account. Until recently, this correspondent had a "throw open the borders" immigration policy, which has been altered out of fear of further reducing his sons' ability to fairly compete for jobs. My attacks on Europeans have been roundly denounced by many readers, especially those of Italian and French ancestry. Now, back to the story, in which Ms. Fong tells of earlier sins:

In your March 22 editorial this year, you wrote about the use of "Chinese strategies involving dripping water, sleep deprivation, thumb nooses and even scalpels" in trying to rid ourselves of haunting lyrics. Please, the Chinese do not have a monopoly on torture techniques, nor should they be characterized as having particularly inhumane ones.

Can you guess what's coming next?

I seem to recall the Spanish Inquisition wasn't exactly known for having gentle methods of extracting information. And let's not forget the ingenious ways that a number of European and American clergymen extracted confessions or "proved" large numbers of women were witches. Remember the American prohibition against "cruel and unusual punishment"? That didn't come as a result of people being tortured or punished by the Chinese. That came from practices that were in effect in this country which had their origins in Europe. The rack, the Iron Maiden, and other such wonderful devices weren't invented by the Chinese. Neither was the practice of drawing and quartering—a particularly cruel way to die, wouldn't you say?

In an attempt to make a political hit, the complainant sent copies of this memo to senior management. I was never disciplined, nor was Ms. Fong permitted to have her intemperate theses posted on the *Rocky's* electronic bulletin board. Nonetheless, it's still my impression that a white male desiring upward mobility in journalism will want to avoid confrontations with the Fongs of this world.

Is there hope for the white man who hopes to enter the profession that made room for Dickens, Hemingway, and Marx? Yes, at least for now. Despite having been targeted as over-represented circulation killers and bonus robbers, white men continue to advance. Last summer, the *Rocky* promoted two white men to the news department's top jobs, editor and managing editor. This may reflect a perceived shallowness in the current talent pool (though in truth it takes only medium intelligence to run most newspapers, as white guys have been proving for years), or it may confirm the suspicion that senior management has exempted itself from these rules. The most certain outcome of these policies, it seems, has been to stigmatize minority staffers and cause deep resentments among white males and their families.

Let's end with a grim anecdote. In August of 1992, a prominent columnist for the *New York Times*, whose name will not be used because personal correspondence is quoted, wrote the editor of the *Rocky Mountain News* seeking a job for a former researcher. His employee was talented, hard

working—a sure hit. His problem, however, was that he was a white guy. "He is a terrific catch," wrote the columnist,

a natural newsman with an instinct for news and a gift for words. Joe is a solid, energetic and reliable reporter. Working for me at the *Times*, he has handled

difficult assignments with dispatch and accuracy. His writing has verve as well as discernment. It almost goes without saying that I consider him a fine editor—I trust him with my own column copy twice a week.

He is leaving me after a one-year internship for a very straightforward reason. The pace of advancement for young reporters at the *Times* is glacial. Top slots are customarily held by reporters with much more experience than Joe has, new slots lately (and appropriately) are going to minorities and women. I've encouraged Joe to look at your newspaper, and other publications, because I think in the next few years he will move farther and faster taking that approach. That's the nub of it.

The nub of it can also be translated this way: "We are refusing to put Joe in a new slot because of his skin color and sex. We are telling him that he may have to move 1,800 miles away from family and friends for reasons that we deem both moral and appropriate. Please, do the right thing because we can't."

There is a notion that race-based recruitment, hiring, and promotion don't discriminate, so long as there are no firm quotas and timetables. Old White Joe, wherever he is now, knows better. □

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## March Madness

by M. D. Carnegie

In the days leading up to Louis Farrakhan's Million Man March, people around Washington were quite unabashedly discussing their apprehensions in bars, in offices, on computer networks, in casual conversation. "When they get together," an Arab pushcart vendor told me, "sometimes there is problem. I hope there is no problem, but I think will be problem." I overheard a black truck driver telling a white colleague: "I heard there's going to be maybe 20,000 gang members. You do *not* want those people running loose around Washington." A white bar owner confided, "Mostly when there's violence they end up hurting themselves. I just hope it doesn't spill over." And some were using the event as an excuse to unleash their own hatreds. "A million [n-word] in Washington," said one man in an online forum. "What a nightmare."

Farrakhan admitted, at the march, that for some people he was a nightmare, but with the national attention focused on him, he didn't say who or why. For decades he has been spewing hate-mongering, divisive, racist claptrap. Several days before the rally, he remarked that Jews were "bloodsuckers," but this was nothing new. He has called Judaism a "gutter religion," and New York the "capital of the Jews." He has long maintained that wealthy Jews collaborated with the Nazis to exterminate the poor ones. He regularly demonizes the "blue-eyed devil." And in 1964, not long after he succeeded Malcolm X as a Nation of Islam minister in Harlem, Farrakhan wrote, "Malcolm shall not escape." He reckoned that "such a man is worthy of death"—and within two months, Malcolm was slain.

His hatreds are venomous and dangerous, in short, yet his acolytes rou-

tinely manage to exceed it. At rallies during the weekend before the march, various activists whipped their audiences into a frenzy with racist and separatist bile. Steve Cokely declared, "Any time we can instigate . . . white-on-white violence, it is in our interest." And fight promoter and activist Rock Newman—you had to hear this one to believe it—exhorted O.J. Simpson and "all the brothers like him" to "return to [their] wives."

As thousands of black men began gathering in the darkness of a cold, crisp autumn morning, then, you could understand why so many people in Washington were sad and afraid. There was a widespread feeling that what was going to happen on the Mall that day—a million men being brought together by a bigot of the very first order—was a very bad thing. But you had to talk to Farrakhan's hardcore followers, the brothers in the bow ties themselves, to know just how bad.

"How you doing?" I asked the first Nation of Islam man I came to, affecting my whitest, country-clubbiest, Dick van Dykest tone. It was still well before sunrise, and we were on a corner a number of blocks from the Mall proper. He was wearing a bow tie, and a top coat, and he flashed me a winning ear-to-ear smile. "Beautiful," he said. "We on the march."

"Well," I said, "I was just wondering how many people you think are going to be show up for the march."

"You seen the news," he said, his smile instantly gone. "You heard the numbers." Then he turned his back on me to address four black men who had walked up on the other side of him: "Brothers, have you had a chance to check out our new telephone calling cards? They have a picture of the Minister right on the front, and cost just ten

dollars." He held out one of the cards for them, and sure enough there was a picture of Farrakhan on it. I had gone down to the rally on my bicycle, and I pedaled away.

On the Mall itself thousands of men were already gathered by the steps of the Capitol, even though the sun was still more than an hour away. Giant TV screens had been erected, and a sound system was blasting loud music. The soundtrack was a mite unusual, though, for a day allegedly set aside to make amends to the womenfolk—James Brown's "Sex Machine." *The way I like it is the way it is, I got mine, Don't worry 'bout his.* "They need to turn that up!" one of the Nation of Islam brethren shouted joyously.

I went over to him. Over his suit and bowtie he was wearing a long black leather overcoat and black leather gloves. "Morning," I said as affably as I could. He looked at me, curled one hand into a fist, and started beating it against the flat palm of his other hand. All the while his head was bobbing up and down in that just-sacked-the-quarterback kind of way. "Yee-uh," he snarled. The fist kept smacking, and his head kept bobbing, and he kept glaring. I didn't bother to ask about James Brown.

Then I came upon an especially sad-looking man; like the others he was neatly attired in a suit, bow tie, and top coat, but his face was that of a hard-lived life. One of his eyes was misshapen and partly closed over, as if it had been mangled in a fight. Though the metaphor didn't strike me until much later, the white of his eye was a bloody red.

I didn't speak at first, but stood near enough to force him, however silently, to acknowledge my presence. I didn't look at him either, turning my head round and round to take in the scene instead. Black men were milling about everywhere, and the sky was beginning to lighten. Some