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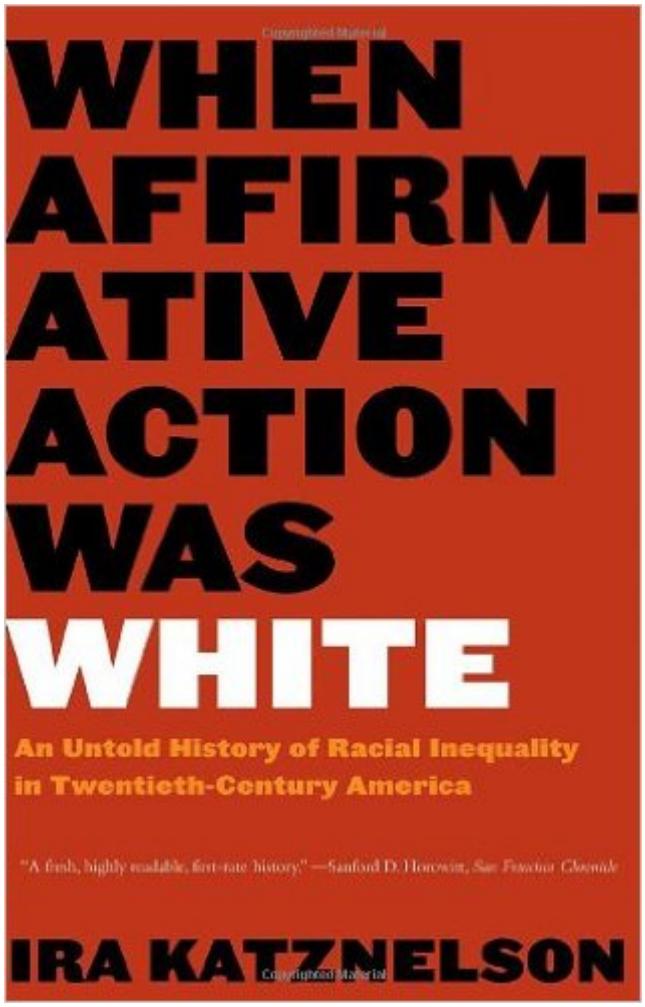
When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History Of Racial Inequality In Twentieth-Century America



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Synopsis

A groundbreaking work that exposes the twisted origins of affirmative action. In this "penetrating new analysis" (New York Times Book Review) Ira Katznelson fundamentally recasts our understanding of twentieth-century American history and demonstrates that all the key programs passed during the New Deal and Fair Deal era of the 1930s and 1940s were created in a deeply discriminatory manner. Through mechanisms designed by Southern Democrats that specifically excluded maids and farm workers, the gap between blacks and whites actually widened despite postwar prosperity. In the words of noted historian Eric Foner, "Katznelson’s incisive book should change the terms of debate about affirmative action, and about the last seventy years of American history."

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

As I read this book I was reminded of the Broadway play and subsequent movie ’1776’ about the creation of the Declaration of Independence. In the play the Southern representatives agreed to support the Declaration only if words prohibiting slavery were taken out. Politics is the art of compromise, and without the Southern states there would have been no Declaration. So slavery was left in.In the time of Roosevelt the Southern politicians had enough clout to stop all of the New Deal legislation if it were made truly color blind. As is often the case, it took a politician from the affected states to force legislation through the Congress to right this wrong. Lyndon Johnson had been in long enough that he truly understood how to get what he wanted through the congress.In this book, the author explains how nominaly racially blind legislation and programs were in fact

deliberatly and subtly were able to exclude blacks from participation. He uses this to make a plea to eliminate poverty and inequality in America.

This book provides valuable statistics comparing white and black economic status in the Depression era. Its strength is its documentation of how New Deal programs (and the GI Bill of Rights) had a disparate impact on whites and blacks. It describes how legislative provisions crafted by Southern Senators, and administration by Southern local officials, meant the African-American workers (often forced to labor as domestics or in agriculture) received far less generous support from the federal government than their white counterparts. Less direct aid, fewer contracts, lack of access to mortgages, non-coverage by the Social Security Act, fewer opportunities to attend universities, meant that the federal government was actively exacerbating the racial economic divide for much of the 20th century.

Regarding the comments of Mr. Greenberg and Mr. Frantzman: yes, blacks may have been heavily represented in the military, but no, they were NOT able to take advantage of the G.I. Bill to obtain Veteran’s mortgage loans.Due to legal restrictions, restrictive convenants, and general violence and protests, blacks in the U.S. in the 1940’s and 1950’s were limited to obtaining housing in only all-black neighborhoods, or in neighborhoods that were rapidly turning all-black. There has been much research done showing that the FHA and VA both participated in redlining, and refused to provide home mortgages in neighborhoods which were all black, or on the verge of becoming all-black.Therefore, any black veteran who wished to purchase a home using his/her V.A. benefits would be severely restricted, by A) not being able to buy a home outside of a black neighborhood, where mortgage funds were readily available and B) being able to find a home in a black neighborhood, but not being able to receive mortgage money to purchase it.Check out the book "From the Tenements to the Taylor Homes: In Search of an Urban Housing Policy in Twentieth-Century America" to see that what I am saying is correct.

Katznelson’s historical review of how legislation has been implemented from the Great Depression’s New Deal to Johnson’s Great Society is an eye-opener for its detail, and for linking the way legislation that looks universal was implemented through states rights to benefit whites and not blacks.The control of Congress by 17 southern states intent on maintaining racist states’ rights segregation made every decent piece of legistation including the GI Bill a boon for white folks and an impediment for African-Americans. Thus affirmative action for whites, of the books’s title, was a

result of a nearly invisible operation over and over; IN ORDEWR TO GET ANY LEGISLATION PASSED, CONCESSIONS HAD TO BE MADE TO THE SOUTHERNERS WHO CONTROLLED COMMITTEES AND THUS LEGISLATION. Because of their one-party white rule in their states, they had seniority in national legislatures, so they had control until Johnson, part of the southern bloc, broke rank during the civil rights struggles.This is a must-read book for its historical documentation of how white working class peoiple benefitted and african-american working class people were denied.

This book is a thoughtful and well-documented antidote to libertarian and conservative propaganda. It shows exactly how racial discrimination permeated every layer of public and private life in both North and South -- and lasted well into the 1970s. Before the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and during legal racial segregation, especially under the GI Bill of Rights, whites -- especially men -- benefited immensely and blacks were either denied benefits or prevented from getting them by local bureaucrats.This is proof that we have barely begun to correct the effect of racial segregation on generations of Americans. White men benefited from quotas in the past. They want to lose no priviledges. Libertarians and conservatives want to keep those advantages for themselves and deny fair competition to all those against whom they discriminated in the past. Color-blind policies now simply perpetuate the unfairness of a color-segregated past.

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