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COULD BE **AFFIRMATIVE ACTION** | Tawanda Scott Sambou
on Race, Religion
and Politics

How Trump became 'the white affirmative action president'

**Story by John Blake, CNN****Video by Tawanda Scott Sambou, CNN**

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(CNN) — When the Trump administration recently signaled that it was going to [crack down on affirmative action](#), some critics responded with an odd request:

Why not start with the man sitting in the Oval Office?

President Donald Trump embodies the worst stereotypes conservatives have invoked to describe affirmative action beneficiaries, according to several commentators, political scientists and diversity experts. They say he's entitled, unqualified and held to lower standards because of racial grievances. They call Trump the nation's first affirmative action president.

"He cannot think his way out of a wet paper bag," says Carol Anderson, historian and author of "White Rage," a winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award.

"He's demonstrated a lack of capacity to understand the bare bones of policy. He didn't go through any of the vetting. His taxes were never really fully revealed," says Anderson. "He had no true medical exam, but folks let that slide. So this myth about affirmative action being about unqualified black and brown folks getting something they don't deserve -- that's Donald Trump."

That's not, however, how Trump defenders see him. They say a corrupt political system needs a disrupter-in-chief. Trump may be raw, but at least he's authentic. And it's not white privilege but "Trump privilege" -- the public persona he cultivated before the Oval Office -- that causes people to hold the President to different standards.

Which group is right? As Trump's first year in office comes to an end, here are three ways he became an affirmative action president, critics say.

Parallel 1: Americans lowered their Oval Office admission standards

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President Trump plays in a fire truck as the media looks on. Critics say Americans have lowered their presidential standards since Trump took office.

But others say there's a fourth factor that gave birth to President Trump: hypocrisy.

Conservatives have lectured women and people of color for years about the importance of meeting high standards. No "handouts" or "set-asides" allowed. Only the most qualified should get the job.

And then millions of these same people voted for a man some critics call the most unqualified president in American history. Trump is the [only American president](#) who came into office with no military or political experience.

Sometimes, they say, it shows.

This fall, Trump [incorrectly stated](#) that a stock market rally could reduce the national debt. He once [said he admired](#) "Article 12" in the Constitution (there are only seven). He also said that Andrew Jackson, the seventh president of the United States, was "[really angry](#)" about the Civil War. Jackson died 16 years before the Civil War began.

"It's a position he's utterly unqualified for," says Anderson. "He doesn't think. He doesn't read. He doesn't connect dots."

Nor does he seem to want to, other critics say.

Trump lacks intellectual curiosity, they say. A new book, "Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House," [portrays a President](#) who has the attention span of a child and does not like to read. Trump biographer Tim O'Brien once called the President "fundamentally lazy." Trump's secretary of state reportedly said worse: Rex Tillerson didn't directly deny reports he called the President a "moron." (Tillerson's spokeswoman later denied he said it.) Trump responded by challenging Tillerson to an IQ test.

"Trump has had a lifetime — 71 years -- and access to America's finest educational institutions (he's a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, he never tires of reminding us) to learn things. And yet he doesn't seem to have acquired even the most basic information that a high school student should possess," wrote Max Boot, a senior fellow for the Council on Foreign Relations, in a column in Foreign Policy entitled, "[Donald Trump is Proving Too Stupid to Be President.](#)"



It's odd that Trump's Justice Department is going after affirmative action while Trump is putting all of these people in positions of power and influence who are clearly not qualified for their positions.

John David Skrentny, author of 'The Ironies of Affirmative Action'

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people can go as far as their talent and ambition can take them. America is not some feudal society where class and wealth determine advancement, they say.

Yet Trump has repeatedly violated the principle of meritocracy by staffing his administration with relatives and others with little expertise in their areas of responsibility, critics say.

[Jared Kushner](#), for example, is one of the most powerful people in Trump's administration. Trump appointed him to be his [peace negotiator](#) in the Middle East and tasked him with tackling the [opioid crisis](#) as well. Kushner's background: He is Trump's son-in-law and a real estate developer from New York. Betsy DeVos, Trump's secretary of education, was a wealthy Republican donor who [never attended public school](#). And Ben Carson, the secretary of housing and urban development, had no experience in [housing policy](#) or [working for the government](#).

"It's odd that Trump's Justice Department is going after affirmative action while Trump is putting all of these people in positions of power and influence who are clearly not qualified for their positions," says John David Skrentny, author of "The Ironies of Affirmative Action." "This is not the meritocracy presidency by any stretch."



Here's why a president's character matters: President Kennedy's cool temperament helped the United States avoid nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Trump, though, is not the first president to staff his Cabinet with relatives or people who didn't have experience in the areas of government they would be overseeing. President John F. Kennedy appointed his brother Robert, a lawyer, to be attorney general. He also appointed Robert McNamara to run the Defense Department though his previous experience was as a Ford executive and CEO.

Many Americans continue to hold Trump to lower standards as he approaches the end of his first year in office, others say.

When the President talks, he often sounds like the guy in class "who doesn't bother to read the book but tries to bluff his way through an oral report," says Mary C. Curtis, who wrote a column in Roll Call entitled, "[Donald Trump -- the Affirmative Action President and His Enablers](#)."

Yet people continue to cut him slack, she says.

"Even in the language of his fellow Republicans, they say '[He's just new at this](#).' That language is so forgiving," Curtis says. "He gets the benefit of the doubt that women and people of color don't."

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Parallel 2: Racial grievances gave him his position

Trump gets away with so many gaffes in part because he is white, critics say. They describe him as the [incarnation](#) of the white backlash against the nation's first black president. No Obama, no Trump.

But it's not just because he's white; Trump is judged by a different standard because he embodies a certain *type* of whiteness, says Mark D. Naison, an activist and history professor who teaches a course on affirmative action at Fordham University in New York.

Trump is white in a way that previous presidents like the more patrician George H.W. Bush and his jocular son George W. Bush could never be, Naison says. He's white America's id unleashed.

"Donald Trump is vulgar, overweight, he's not politically correct," says Naison. "So there's this whole swath of white America who says we finally see one of us up there."

It's a swath that's also bubbling with racial grievances. As America [grows browner](#), many whites now see themselves as a [racially oppressed group](#). About 60% of white Americans and roughly two-thirds of white working-class Americans say discrimination against whites is now as big a problem as discrimination against blacks and other minorities, according to a [2016 poll by the Public Religion Research Institute](#). These are some of the same people who say white Christians are the most persecuted religious group in America and that while "white privilege" is bogus, "[black privilege](#)" is real.

Racial grievances spawned affirmative action. After the race riots of the mid-1960s, political leaders [created](#) affirmative action programs to address rising black anger and compensate for historical injustice, Naison says.

And racial grievances have now given America Trump, he says.



It's not white privilege. It's Trump privilege.

Shayne Lee, University of Houston sociologist, on how Trump gets away with certain types of behavior

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Trump isn't just the leader of the United States. He is the "president of white rage," one historian says.

racial progress, someone who channels their anger.

"The guy they chose," Naison says, "shows the level of anger among some whites. He's as angry as they are. He's the white affirmative action president. It's like they're saying we waited for somebody who looks and talks just like us.

"I don't see him as a projection of white supremacy," Naison says. "He's the president of white rage."

And rage is resilient. Six in 10 people who approve of Trump's job as President say they can't think of anything he could do that would make them disapprove of him, according to one [recent survey](#) from Monmouth University.

"It's a psychic reward that some white people get if white people are in control of everything," Naison says. "Even if they're getting f---ed. People are deeply invested in him succeeding, even if he's failing."

Trump's presidency could have an unexpected side effect: It could refute the notion that white men are better suited to be leaders, says Anderson, author of "White Rage."

"There's an automatic assumption of qualified when it's attached to whiteness," Anderson says. "That standard of white as being the norm of excellence is one of the things that you're beginning to see questioned in some of the most vigorous ways because of the blatant inadequacy of Donald Trump."

Parallel 3: He embodies the 'soft bigotry of low expectations'

They called it being "presidential." A person was supposed to bring a certain decorum and restraint to the Oval Office. Any man who didn't behave in a presidential way paid a price.

In 1972, Edmund Muskie was the leading candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination when he did something shocking. He was accused of crying during a campaign stop while defending his wife from a personal attack. His campaign collapsed. Four years later, former President Jimmy Carter almost lost his White House bid when he admitted in a Playboy interview that he lusted in his heart after other women. Former President Barack Obama was accused of disrespecting the presidency when he was photographed [putting his feet on the Oval Office desk](#) and saluting a Marine while [holding a cup of coffee](#).

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See anything outrageous here?
President Obama was accused of
disrespecting the presidency for
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desk.

"would do anything for them." USA Today responded by saying that Trump was "[not fit to clean the toilets](#)" in Obama's presidential library because he implied that "a United States senator would trade sexual favors for campaign cash."

Curtis, the Roll Call columnist, was particularly offended by Trump's comments about Puerto Ricans.

"It recalled the language that's been used before against people of color, for instance, when black people were toiling in the field all day without compensation and being called lazy and shiftless by people on the porch drinking mint juleps," she says.

And then there's Trump's relationship with the truth. It's complicated.

The New York Times editorial board recently detailed those differences, in "[The Republican's Guide to Presidential Etiquette](#)," showing how Trump had created a "whole new bar for tolerable conduct" among presidents during his first 10 months.

In it, they noted, he has:

Mocked a foreign leader, called him an insulting nickname and threatened on Twitter to destroy his country; attacked a senator battling terminal cancer; and complained that some Puerto Ricans -- US citizens who had lost access to fuel, water and medical supplies in Hurricane Maria -- "[want everything to be done for them](#)."

Trump was also recently criticized for a tweet in which he said that Democratic Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand was "begging" him for campaign donations and

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Americans have traditionally demanded honesty from a president. According to legend, George Washington was lauded for saying he could not tell a lie.

she says.

Affirmative action critics have a catchphrase for that kind of dynamic. It's called the "[soft bigotry of low expectations](#)." It was a term coined by a conservative speechwriter and first uttered by President George W. Bush. It means not expecting students of color to perform and [not holding them accountable](#). You actually harm them not through overt racism but by not holding them to the same expectations as others.

If someone tries to challenge Trump's behavior, his supporters will often respond with accusations of being elitist, some say.

"He's created this immunity for himself," says [Jennifer Mercieca](#), an associate professor of speech at Texas A&M who is writing a book on Trump's rhetoric. "If you try to criticize him, you're just part of the corrupt establishment or you're just trying to prevent him from heroically saving people from corruption."

cannot tell a lie." Trump has a different attitude toward truth, according to the fact-checking web site PolitiFact. [It recently rated](#) 69% of Trump statements as "mostly false," "false" or "pants on fire" lies.

Obama is one of Trump's favorite targets. He's told falsehoods about everything from Obama's birthplace to saying Obama [didn't write his own memoir](#) and even accused Obama of [wiretapping Trump Tower](#). According to the Washington Post's Fact Checker column, Trump makes an average of five "[false or misleading](#)" claims a day.

Americans expect so little from Trump that he's described as acting "presidential" when performing the most mundane tasks, says Anderson, author of "White Rage."

"He's now becoming 'presidential' simply because he read a speech off a teleprompter without a gaffe,"



He can't be controlled. The way he says things might appeal to people who do hold racist opinions, but they also appeal to people who don't agree with what he says but like the fact that he says what he thinks.

Jennifer Mercieca, associate professor of speech at Texas A&M

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What critics don't get about Trump or his supporters

His supporters, though, scoff at the notion of Trump as an affirmative action president. Critics didn't get Trump when he was running for President and they still don't get him today, his supporters say.

No one becomes a multimillionaire businessman and the President of the United States without having exceptional skills and drive, they say.

"I'm not saying the man is not talented. He may be a bully, but he built an empire in business and did far greater than his wealthy father did," says Naison. "Anybody who could run a global business of the magnitude that he did is capable of administering a complex governmental entity."

Besides, Trump can speak to people in a way other scripted politicians cannot.

Mercieca, who is a critic of Trump, studied his campaign speeches and concluded he is a "deceptively brilliant" communicator.

"He's not afraid to alienate people who say you have to say things in a certain way," she says. "He can't be controlled. The way he says things might appeal to people who do hold racist opinions, but they also appeal to people who don't agree with what he says but like the fact that he says what he thinks."

Shayne Lee, a sociologist at the University of Houston, has another explanation for why Trump can get away with not acting in a traditionally presidential way. It's not because he's white, or the "soft bigotry of low expectations," he says. It's because he's Trump.

"He has always enjoyed a level of freedom that others haven't," [says Lee, who doesn't count himself as a Trump supporter](#). "He never worked for corporate America. He never had to conform his norms to the established system. He was always a rule breaker. His whole brand was built on being outrageous."

"It's not white privilege. It's Trump privilege."



Was Barack Obama a black racial token -- someone who was put in the Oval Office despite his inexperience?

Matt Margolis, author of 'The Worst President in History: The Legacy of Barack Obama'

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Pundits continue to underestimate Trump's ability and his hold on his core supporters, some say.

of his race. Obama was a former community organizer and state lawmaker in the midst of his first term in the US Senate when he ran for the Oval Office.

"Was Barack Obama a black racial token -- someone who was put in the Oval Office despite his inexperience?" asks [Matt Margolis](#), author of "The Worst President in History: The Legacy of Barack Obama."

"Why didn't the media ask whether Americans 'lowered their standards' just to put Obama in office?"

The constant criticism of Trump only emboldens his supporters and ensures his re-election, Margolis says.

"Let's stop trying to make everything about race when it's not," he says. "After all, Trump [did better](#) with African-Americans and Hispanics than Romney did in 2012."

And then there's the question of presidential qualifications and experience. It's not as simple as you might think.

There's this assumption that Americans typically elect the most qualified person to be president, but that's actually a myth, according to Jake Novak, a CNBC columnist. He says "qualifications have become cheap in a political atmosphere where most voters distrust politicians inherently."

Novak [says American voters](#) have picked "less traditionally qualified" candidates in the last four presidential elections. President Bill Clinton, for example, was a governor of a small Southern state with no foreign policy experience. Yet in 1992 he beat George H. W. Bush, an incumbent president and World War II hero who had just defeated Saddam Hussein in the first Gulf War.

"Records and resumes don't really matter," Novak says. "Humans are emotional beings, and the candidate who connects with our emotions the best will win, period."

Presidential historian Robert Strauss says history also shows that a president's resume is overrated.

He says Presidents Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt were considered political lightweights before they entered the Oval Office. They'd lost big elections and didn't have broad experience. Yet they became two of the greatest American presidents.

Then there is one of the nation's worst presidents, James Buchanan. Strauss wrote the book on him: "Worst. President. Ever: James Buchanan, The POTUS Rating Game, And The Legacy Of The Least Of The Lesser Presidents."

Buchanan had the best resume of anyone who has run for president. He served in both houses of Congress,



He gets the benefit of the doubt that women and people of color don't.

Mary C. Curtis, in a Roll Call column on Trump

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nation's slide into its worst internal conflict, the Civil War.

"He was an awful president," Strauss says of Buchanan. "So I don't know what prepares you for the presidency. I can't tell you that there is a qualification."

The ultimate test ahead

Character, though, may be one vital qualification if you listen to historians.

Pivotal events in US history are often shaped by the character of the president, some of them say. Part of Lincoln's greatness was his magnanimous nature -- "with malice toward none, with charity for all." It helped him corral the "team of rivals" in his Cabinet and reconcile the nation after its bloodiest American war, they say.

The Cuban Missile Crisis might have also turned out differently if President Kennedy, a student of history and a former war hero, didn't have the confidence to reject his military leaders' request to invade Cuba.

If an unqualified person in an affirmative action program gets a spot he doesn't deserve, some deserving applicant may lose out on a job opportunity or not be able to attend her desired college. But if an unfit person sits in the Oval Office, humanity's survival could literally be at stake.

Perhaps that is why Trump got so much attention at a recent White House event where he appeared to allude to an imminent war. During a photo session for a White House dinner with military commanders, Trump delivered a cryptic warning to the press while flanked by military commanders.

"You know what this represents? Maybe it's the calm before the storm," he said.

The remark set off a flurry of questions. Was Trump talking about war with Iran? ISIS? A nuclear confrontation with North Korea?

"You'll find out," Trump said.

Maybe. Hopefully not. Each week seems to bring some new drama from the Oval Office. Is that drama a product of unfair criticism of an unorthodox president? Or is Trump the nation's first affirmative action president, someone who is in way over his head?

We have at least three more years left of his presidency. More events that test Trump's character are bound to come.



Donald Trump is vulgar, overweight, he's not politically correct. So there's this whole swath of white America who says we finally see one of us up there.

Mark D. Naison, Fordham University professor and activist