How Trump became 'the white affirmative action president'

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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
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'
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."

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

"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.
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 "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.
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
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."
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
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.