



Arthur Fletcher

“The Father of Affirmative Action”

--A mind is a terrible thing to waste--

Arthur Fletcher devoted his life to preserve the promise of the Constitution for all Americans. It was a long way from Phoenix Arizona where Fletcher was born, to the White House where he served as advisor to Presidents Nixon, Ford, Reagan and George H.W. Bush. Along the way Fletcher served in World War II, under General Patton, played professional football for the Los Angeles Rams and Baltimore Colts and managed to obtain a Ph.D. in Education and a law degree.

Fletcher was nicknamed the “Father of Affirmative Action” and he started earning this moniker as a high school senior, when he led a protest against his school for their policy of putting the pictures of African-American graduates in the back of the yearbook. In a 1991 Ebony magazine article, he recalled the exact moment he decided to dedicate his life to civil rights. He was in the seventh grade, in Oklahoma City when civil rights pioneer, Mary McLeod Bethune, spoke to his school. He recalled her saying: "I am as black as the ace of spades and anything but beautiful, yet I have been summoned to the White House to advise presidents. . . . I know that I am talking to someone in this auditorium who is going to grow up and advise a president of the United States, too."

Fletcher, taking to heart Bethune's admonition to "always carry a brief for black folks," vowed to be that person¹.

Fletcher started in politics in 1954, when he worked on Fred Hall's gubernatorial campaign and took a position working for the Kansas Highway Commission. By learning how government contracts were awarded, Fletcher encouraged African American business to compete for those contracts.

In 1969, President Nixon appointed Fletcher to the post of Assistant Secretary of Wage and Labor standards in the Department of Labor. Here he developed and administered the "Revised Philadelphia Plan" to enforce equal employment and business opportunity for minority businesses pursuing government-funded contracts.

¹<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/07/13/AR2005071302400.html>

Before Fletcher came along, affirmative action was mostly hortatory because laws outlined in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, such as those barring discrimination in the workplace, did not force employers to keep track of the number of minorities and women they hired. Fletcher strengthened the program by aligning affirmative action with laws governing hiring policies in the public sector. Fletcher's ideas, spelled out in a document called the *Revised Philadelphia Plan*, are still the basis for affirmative-action enforcement today. Fletcher believed that without economic security all of the social gains made by African Americans would be meaningless.

Later Fletcher was appointed by President Gerald Ford to be his deputy of Urban Affairs advisor.

He never hesitated to speak his mind about fellow Republicans. Although he was an adviser to President Ronald Reagan, he called Reagan "the worst president for civil rights in this century." And while chairman of the Civil Rights Commission, he blasted President George H.W. Bush for labeling civil rights legislation as a quota bill.²

Following his career with the federal government, in 1972 Fletcher took a position as executive director of the United Negro College Fund where he helped coin the phrase "a mind is a terrible thing to waste."

In more recent years, Fletcher was appointed to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in 1990, where he served until 1993 as chairman and a commissioner. In 1996, prompted by Senator Bob Dole's reversal of his forty-year affirmative action policy, Fletcher made an unsuccessful run for the presidency. He later became an entrepreneur, as president and CEO of Fletcher's Learning Systems and publisher of *USA Tomorrow/The Fletcher Letter*.

Fletcher spent a great deal of time touring the country for speaking engagements on equal opportunity rights and the benefits of affirmative action, and served as the chairman of the National Black Chamber of Commerce. He wrote several articles that have appeared in magazines such as *Ebony* and *Fortune* and wrote a book, *My Hour of Power*.³

He died of a heart attack at the age of 80, in 2005.

Other Sources

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² Ibid

³ <http://www.thehistorymakers.com/biography/biography.asp?bioindex=526>