



Written by [Thomas Sowell](#) on March 20, 2012

Racial Quota Fallout

When he encountered difficulties, his professors essentially wrote his doctoral thesis for him. No doubt they felt good about doing something to help a promising young black man, and perhaps took pride in doing so. But what about his pride?

This young man ended up joining an extremist group that hated white people.

Would it have been worse if he had not gotten a Ph.D. in math? Probably 99 percent of the people in this country, regardless of race, could not get a Ph.D. in math — and yet they can still live happy and fulfilling lives.



What recalled this episode from long ago was the current flurry of interest in a video of a young Barack Obama at the Harvard law school praising Derrick Bell, a black professor there, whose writings on “critical race theory” promoted an extremist hostility to white people.

Derrick Bell was for years a civil rights lawyer, but not an academic legal scholar of the sort who gets appointed as a full professor at one of the leading law schools. Yet he became a visiting professor at the Stanford law school and was a full professor at the Harvard law school.

It was transparently obvious in both cases that his appointment was because he was black, not because he had the qualifications that got other people appointed to these faculties. At Stanford, his students complained that his course on constitutional law was not up to the standards of the other courses they were taking.

Stanford at that time had one of the leading scholars in constitutional law, Professor Gerald Gunther — and Derrick Bell was no Gerald Gunther. A hastily created program of study of constitutional law was then used to teach that subject to students who were not getting what they needed in Professor Bell’s course.

When this clever finessing of the problem came to light, the administration apologized — to Derrick Bell for the embarrassment this caused him.

They should have apologized to the law students for short-changing them with a professor who was not up to the job — and to those who donated money to the university to advance the cause of education, not to allow administrators to play racial quota politics on campus.

As a full professor at the Harvard law school, Derrick Bell was also surrounded by colleagues who were out of his league as academic scholars. What were his options at this point?

If he played it straight, he could not expect to command the respect of either faculty or students at the Harvard law school — or, more important, his own self-respect. Bell himself admitted that he did not have the scholarly credentials that most full professors at the Harvard law school have.

There were no doubt other law schools where he would have been a respected colleague, but these



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were not Stanford or Harvard. Yet it is worth remembering that millions of people have led happy and fulfilling lives without ever being at Harvard or Stanford.

Derrick Bell's options were to be a nobody, living in the shadow of more accomplished legal scholars — or to go off on some wild tangent of his own, and appeal to a radical racial constituency on campus and beyond.

His writings showed clearly that the latter was the path he chose. His previous writings had been those of a sensible man saying sensible things about civil rights issues that he understood from his years of experience as an attorney. But now he wrote all sorts of incoherent speculations and pronouncements, the main drift of which was that white people were the cause of black people's problems.

Bell even said that he took it as his mission to say things to annoy white people. Perhaps he thought that was better than being insignificant in his academic setting. But it was in fact far worse, because the real damage was to impressionable young blacks who took him seriously, including one who went on to become President of the United States.

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