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The Decline of Merit

The present list of dire predictions is long enough: loss of confidence in representative government, depression, collapse of the world monetary system, nuclear terrorism, or Manhattan Island bought by an Arab oil potentate. To these we must add one more: the end of merit as the primary means by which professionals are recruited, selected, rewarded, promoted, and judged. This could be the last straw. Merit is the principle that selection, promotion, and reward for individuals should be based on the quality of their individual performance. If this principle is lost, mediocrity becomes inevitable.

The evidence is all around us that adherence to the merit principle is on the decline. Seniority, job rights, and tenure dominate most civil service systems in the country. Effective merit compensation and performance evaluation systems are rare in state and local governments and in public school systems, and proposals for their adoption are under strong attack. Our daughter comes home from the sixth grade with a glowing report card and a marvelous social experience, but tells us candidly that she hasn't been required to learn very much. In the foreign service of the United States, the "up or out" principle is under serious fire. While many unions and employee organizations genuinely support merit and have often promoted the adoption of merit systems, the union hiring hall may not be far off for most professionals and public servants.

In the academy itself, tenure is on its way to becoming a job rights system for the protection of mediocrity rather than the right of free inquiry. And, except for the first tenure decision made too early in the professor's professional career, academe has little stomach for the hard choices.

Racial and sexual discrimination in personnel systems, the professions, and labor unions has turned a spotlight on the personnel process much as did widespread corruption and political patronage in an earlier time. The attention which the urgent need for aggressive affirmative action for employment of women and minorities has focused on the justice of personnel decisions is long overdue. Good affirmative action programs honor the merit principle because the goal of equal employment opportunity is a merit system and the means of its attainment must be consistent with that goal. Affirmative action advocates who are working zealously to correct the dreadful effects of racial and sexual discrimination know they must adhere strongly to the merit principle lest they hand the remaining racists and sexists, and also some serious liberal doubters, a crowbar—reverse discrimination and lowered standards. Merit system advocates know that a merit personnel system is a hollow mockery if the work force thus selected is not both determined by merit and representative of the society it serves. Those who believe in merit and those who believe in affirmative action must hold together or lose both. Merit, equal employment opportunity, and affirmative action are all soldiers in the same cause—a just, whole, fair, productive, and representative society.

Brains and sound quality performance will be the basis of whatever success our society has in dealing with the seemingly intractable problems of our times. American society must quite literally live by its wits in a time when its resources, its oceans, its lands, and its special political institutions won't carry the weight they once did, and when military strength cannot and should not. Strengthening the principle of merit in our society thus becomes a matter of survival.—BREWSTER C. DENNY, *Graduate School of Public Affairs, University of Washington, Seattle 98105*