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# The Need for Asian American Leadership: A Call to Action

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At the cusp of the new millennium, civilizations, cultures, and individuals worldwide are pausing to reflect upon where we are going and where we have been. So it is especially appropriate for the Asian American Policy Review to focus the present volume on “Asian Pacific Americans in the New Millennium.” What is the current state of Asian America? What opportunities and challenges face our community? And what will we need to prepare for as we enter the uncharted waters of a new millennium?

In an era of rapid, far-reaching, and complex change, we cannot imagine all of the things the next century will require of us. We can, however, prepare for our journey, and the journeys of our children, by building upon our strengths and collective memories. This preparation will provide our community with a sturdy, seaworthy vessel that will prevail through the rough seas ahead.

First, we must remember our history, which is the raw material from which our present is constructed.

Second, we must take control of the present, which is the structure upon which we shall sail.

And third, we must develop leadership, which will be the wind that powers our sails. By leadership, I do not mean just elected leaders in government. We need a new generation of leaders in all sectors — public, private, and nonprofit — to create a more vibrant and healthy Asian American community.

Although the Asian population in the United States increased dramatically after the Immigration Act of 1965, Asian Americans have been in the United States for well over 150 years. My own family’s history in America began in the late 1800s when my grandfather came to this country and worked as a houseboy for a family that lived about a mile from where I now live in the Governor’s mansion.

Although the family my grandfather worked for was kind and helped him learn English in return for his work, those were not the best of times for Asian Americans or other minority Americans. In fact, non-white Americans were excluded from churches, barbershops, and restaurants. They were forced to sit in the balconies of movie theaters and the back seats of buses. Children were required to attend segre-

gated schools and workers received lower wages than their white counterparts for doing the same job.

Furthermore, unlike European immigrants, Asians were also victimized by policies that institutionalized racial discrimination. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 made it unlawful for Chinese laborers to enter the United States. This prohibition was broadened in 1888 to include “all persons of the Chinese race.”<sup>1</sup> Congress did not repeal this act until the 1940s. Other Asian groups also faced exclusionary policies. The Immigration Act of 1924, for example, stated that “no aliens ineligible to citizenship”<sup>2</sup> could be admitted to the United States. This law, of course, effectively blocked Asian immigration since the Naturalization Law of 1790 specified that naturalized citizenship was reserved for “whites” only. Unlike their European counterparts, Asian immigrants could not become citizens or exercise their rights through the ballot box. As “aliens ineligible to citizenship,” they were also prohibited by the laws of many states from land ownership. The 1922 Cable Act even went a step further by stating that any American woman who married “an alien ineligible to citizenship” would cease to be a citizen of the United States.

Although we cannot undo the injustices of the past, it is critical that we understand that our history of racism and exclusion is *recent* history. Only two generations ago — during my grandfather’s lifetime — slavery existed as an important part of our economy. Only two generations ago — again during my grandfather’s lifetime — Congress, acting on anti-Chinese sentiment, passed the Chinese Exclusion Act.

Japanese Americans faced the internment camps in the forties. Constitutionally guaranteed civil rights were denied to over 120,000 men, women, and children of Japanese descent. Two-thirds of those interned were U.S. citizens by birth.<sup>3</sup> The incarceration of our Japanese American brothers and sisters behind barbed wire fences in internment camps is now recognized as one of the worst civil rights violations in our country’s history.

The vestiges of laws restricting Asian Americans’ rights were not lifted until the latter half of this century. The Naturalization Law of 1790, for example, was not lifted until 1952. We are the first generation of Asian Americans to be free from the shackles of legal discrimination. It is, therefore, our generation’s obligation and privilege to honor our ancestors’ struggle for equality by embracing the opportunities before us.

The good news is that Asian Americans are one of the fastest growing ethnic groups in the nation and are actively participating in our national economy and culture. However, Asian Americans have one of the lowest rates of voter participation among all ethnic groups. After having been denied basic rights for so long, Asian Americans should use the power that they are now free to enjoy as citizens.

We have made tremendous progress as a nation. As this country’s first Chinese American governor on the U.S. mainland, I am honored to be an emblem of that progress.

I am also proud to be the governor of a pioneer state that has a long history of electing women and people of color, in spite of the fact that we are a small percent-

age of the population. For example, in the 1996 primary election, the top two vote-getters in the governor's race were myself and Norm Rice, the African American mayor of Seattle.

Between the two of us, we captured over 40 percent of the vote in a field of 15 Democrat and Republican candidates. I like to think that the state of Washington retains the spirit of openness, adventure, and community that were the hallmarks of its first people and its first immigrants.

My generation actively participated in the Civil Rights movement during the 1960s. We made tremendous progress in establishing laws and policies to ensure that all Americans, regardless of color, would be treated equally and fairly. Today, in both the public and the private sectors, Asian Americans are thriving as economists, scientists, managers, attorneys, health care practitioners, child development specialists, artists, actors, and in thousands of other professions. We can rightfully be proud of how much we're contributing to America and how far we have come in this century.

Yet, at the same time, there remain great challenges. Not all Asian Americans are benefiting from the new economy. Despite higher educational attainment and high median family income, the poverty rate for Asian American families is often higher than that for white families.<sup>4</sup> And within some Asian American ethnic communities, especially the newer immigrant communities, there is low educational attainment and access.

Furthermore, we still see occurrences of anti-Asian violence. The 1999 murders of Korean student Won-Joon Yoon by white supremacist Benjamin Nathaniel Smith in Indiana and Filipino American postman Joseph Ito by another white supremacist, Buford Furrow, in Los Angeles are unfortunate reminders that racially motivated violence is still alive.

We are also seeing stronger assaults on affirmative action in this post-civil rights era. Recent litigation and ballot initiatives all over the country are eliminating valuable tools for increasing equal opportunity. The recent political scandals involving Asian Americans (e.g., campaign donations and the Wen Ho Lee case) perpetuate the stereotype that all Asians are foreigners and that ethnicity ultimately determines loyalty. I am as adamant as anyone else in the belief that we ought to fix what is wrong with our campaign finance system and that national security is critical. But it is just plain wrong to be suspicious of all Asian Americans based upon the actions of a few.

To address these growing challenges, we need to respond as a community. We need to register to vote and make sure the issues we care about are heard, represented, and addressed. More Asian Americans need to run for public office so that we are at the table when laws that affect all of us are influenced and made. And, as we move forward into the new millennium, we have to make sure that we are developing a new generation of leadership.

We need leaders who will oppose the national attack on affirmative action. For me, affirmative action has never been about quotas or hiring unqualified persons. Affirmative action is simply the opposite of *passive inaction*. It is about con-

sciously considering those who have been excluded in the past. We need leaders who will fight for education because it is society's great equalizer. We need leaders who will talk about why it is wrong to judge and punish an entire ethnic group for individual actions. We need leaders who will combat hate crimes and protect the rights of immigrants. We need leaders who will continue to speak out against prejudice, to participate in the political life of this country, and to promote a vision of equal treatment and equal opportunity for everyone.

We need leaders to push this period of backlash into a cycle of real progress in the new century. Leadership can take many forms but it requires each of us to take personal responsibility in educating ourselves about these issues and taking action to improve our communities. Each and every one of us can make a difference. Elected officials and the government cannot do it all or alone.

We bring into the new century a legacy of the blood, sweat, and tears of our parents and our grandparents who helped make this country all that it is today. We owe it to our ancestors to take action that will guarantee that the children of the twenty-first century do not have to live through the cycles of discrimination that have marred our own coming of age.

The future of our children depends upon our willingness to take action and get involved in strengthening our communities. I have absolute confidence that we are both willing and able. That is why as we stand ready to sail into the new millennium, I am filled with hope and optimism.

In a little town in Vermont, there is a think tank called the Center for Living Democracy. Their web page has the following saying: "Democracy is not what we *have*; it's what we *do*." I could not agree more. Will you "do" democracy with me?

Will you take the time to educate, to listen, to share, and take action to create a more healthy and vibrant Asian American community and to make sure *all* Americans have equal access to opportunity?

I hope so. Let us use our collective power to keep moving America forward.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> There were some exemptions for Chinese officials, teachers, students, tourists, and merchants.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*. Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1989, 14.

<sup>3</sup> Takaki, 15.

<sup>4</sup> Larry Hajime Shinagawa, "The Impact of Immigration to the Demography of Asian Pacific Americans" in *National Asian Pacific American Political Almanac*, UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1998–99, 72.