

CIRCLE OF LIFE

Asian Americans as a Movement

Dale Minami

Dale Minami is an attorney in San Francisco and has practiced law for thirty-five years. He received the American Bar Association's Thurgood Marshall Award in 2003.

Any Asian in this country with the intent to live here permanently is an Asian American. I don't think of it just as a political term anymore. It's a social term that disregards the [specific] demographics of people who come from certain parts of the world.

Things change and things evolve. When you talk about Asian Americans in the sixties and seventies I think that was a narrow demographic compared to the numbers we have now. More than 60 percent of Asian Americans now are immigrants. They don't have the experience of the sixties. They don't have the chance to see what African Americans or Latino Americans did. They don't understand the struggle just to get equal dignity. They have their own struggles. So a lot of immigrants are not taught or not given the advantage of that historical perspective. It's become much more diffuse.

But what you do have is a lot of groups that want to help the notion of community improve in power, immigrant or nonimmigrant. We have bigger numbers now; we have more people who are politically active. So it has gotten better to the extent that we have more people and those people are more willing to do community work or get involved in some way.

I think there's less anger today. I mean, we were angry back

then—when you learn about the history of what you've gone through and what your parents have gone through. In our day it was about overturning the whole system to make it more equitable economically and socially. For people today it's much more about empowerment and financial success.

As long as you realize where you came from, and that somewhere, sometime, someone has helped you to create that circle of history then it is really incumbent on you to sometime, somewhere, help somebody else. If you're a famous Asian American who isolates yourself from the community, you're probably having some good effect on the perception of Americans—that this is a successful Asian American who is probably a role model for somebody. But I have much more respect for those who try to come back and help.

Now I see people engaging in social services, fighting racism at the legislative level. So it's the same kind of notion—that we need to help people who are less fortunate, or who need help.

Race: I still think race is a major question that needs to be resolved in this country. It's been submerged but it's always going to come back in some form until you see a more proportional [representation] of people in society. If you're talking about the immigration debate—that's about race, it's not just about immigration. It's not about Canadian or French people coming; it's about Mexicans coming over here, people from South America. That's a question of race because it's a question of what our culture is going to be in the future.

As Pat Buchanan said, we have a cultural war going on here. What he's really saying is that white people are feeling threatened by the number of minorities who are now in this country, that are growing at a huge rate, and that soon we may not see the Anglo-Saxon culture survive. So I think that the issue of race is being submerged or it's not being talked about as directly; it's camouflaged into other issues. Take the whole immigration debate that's still going on. I think we've made great progress, don't get me wrong on that. I think as a country we've really made wonderful improve-



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ments, if you think about it from the lynchings to the internment camps to some of the really overt racism. But what you find is that it's a little bit more submerged, a little more subtle; it's going to be camouflaged as an immigration issue, not a race issue.

I've seen some improvement in America's understanding of the racial paradigm, which was always black and white. Now we occasionally get a notion that there's more than black and white, that it's technicolor, with Latinos and Asian Americans represented at the table when you see diversity. But it's not improved nearly to the degree that I would've liked.

We still see hate crimes and see anecdotal evidence, including personal episodes, where white America sees us as perpetual foreigners. To that extent there's still a lot that needs to be done and progress to be made.

Born in the U.S.A.: I think in some ways I feel really lucky to have Japanese ancestry; it traces back thousands of years, just like if you were Chinese. It's something to be proud of; civilizations and cultures can bring pride out of you in terms of what your people have done.

As an American I would never have wanted to have been born in any other country. I'm really lucky to be here. I think about people who were born in Somalia just by accident of birth, or they're in Pakistan or Bangladesh—I just think about that, and the greatness of our country. We're criticized over and over because we always want it to be better, and we said it was perfect, even though it wasn't. We thought we could try to make it perfect, so I think this country has tried to adapt and incorporate people from diverse cultures to the extent that I have both a Japanese background and an American background. I really feel fortunate.

I feel fortunate too because I was able to grow up with a diverse group of people—African Americans, Latino Americans—that helped me to understand why diversity is so important to this country. It's the only way this country will survive without more racial havoc or tension. W.E.B. DuBois always wrote about the color line and the great issue of the nineteenth century. It became a great issue in the twentieth century with the riots in the sixties and the issue of affirmative action thereafter. I think race is always going to be an issue.

But I think the greater issues that are coming up are economic issues. I always feel that when you have economic issues or crises then you have tensions. It brings out the worst in a country, the worst in its people. That's what happened to my parents in Japan after Pearl Harbor. People couldn't distinguish Japanese Americans from the Japanese. I worry that the same thing might happen with China. With the strength of China, the power it has economically; politically (not militarily), I think that's going to impact us all as Asian Americans here.

As far as the future of Asian Americans, I do see younger peo-

ple with a little different perspective. But I think the bottom line is they want to see a more equitable society, a society with a lot less racism—a society with people who are not spending their money on wars or military contractors, but on social services that are helping the people. They do have that sense of social justice that is perhaps even broader than the sense that we grew up with because they have a broader experience. I think the issue for all of us is the Internet.

Community Building, Political Activism, and the Internet:

What I saw in the Abercrombie & Fitch boycott was a terrific model for Asian Americans to follow; one that fits more of their personalities, their skills, their propensities. [The retailer launched a line of T-shirts depicting what some Asians feel to be stereotypical images.] That boycott was started, spread, and won through the Internet and use of e-mail in almost an organic way. I've always talked about trying to create an organization that enforced a boycott against an offending politician, company, or DJ because I think Asian Americans have buying power. If they could apply that toward social justice by use of the Internet, that kind of power would be really formidable. I don't think we've even begun to tap that power. Through Web sites like MySpace or Facebook or Friendster, they have built these virtual communities of Asian Americans that aren't just Japanese, Chinese, or Korean communities. The aim is to reach out. You find them creating this idea of Asian American online. College campuses are probably where most of the organizing takes place. I think that's why the Abercrombie & Fitch boycott was so successful. Organizers were able to reach thousands of people in a matter of days, maybe even hours. I think if you set up those kinds of networks it's going to help people understand the commonalities of being Asian Americans rather than the differences. To that extent the computer and the Internet are going to be the X factor in what happens to our Asian American community.