

Floor Statement by Senator Bill Bradley on Race Relations and Americans from Asia

Thursday, July 14, 1994

In the past three years, I have given a number of speeches on race relations in America. They have focused primarily on a black and white portrait of America. Today I want to broaden that view and talk about Americans whose ancestors come from Asia. I want to do it in a way that is forthright, historical, and personal, and in a way that challenges us to think about the incredible potential of America's increasing diversity.

A young Chinese American girl during the late 1960s was discussing the civil rights movement in a schoolyard with two of her friends. One was black and the other was white. As the conversation became more animated, the African American friend turned to the Chinese American girl and said, "You've gotta decide whether you're black or white."

For too many Americans whose ancestors come from Asia this story rings familiar. Asian Pacific Americans live in a country where minority means black, and bilingual means Spanish-English. Some Americans do not register that Asian Pacific Americans are even a thread in our national fabric, and many more only see them through stereotypes and caricatures, ranging from the gifted math and science students of the so-called "model minority myth," to exotic geisha girls, Bruce Lee and kung-fu, and waiters serving mu-shu pork in Chinese restaurants. Stereotypes -- both positive and negative -- about Asian Americans abound, but they hardly illuminate the complexity of their cultures or their social contributions.

Asian Americans have a rich history in the United States. In the 1850s, the blood and sweat of 10,000 Chinese immigrants built the Transcontinental Railway. Japanese Americans, in the early 1900s, were a dominant force in California agriculture, producing up to 90 percent of some crops, while controlling only a tiny fraction of the state's fertile farm land. More recently, from ice-skater Kristi Yamaguchi to playwright David Hwang, Asian Pacific Americans have been achieving success in politics, business, academia, sports, and the arts. Since I've been in the Senate, four of my colleagues have been Asian Pacific Americans, and Senator Daniel Inouye of Hawaii has become one of the most respected senators of the past 50 years.

Like most white Americans, I have felt the impulse to consider nonwhites as fundamentally "different" from me. Only contact and interaction has taught me the stupidity and foolishness of those views. With African Americans, that contact began in childhood, matured with my reading of American history, and deepened in professional basketball. When I lived with African Americans day in and day out on the road in America. With Asian Americans, that journey began with a fascination for that which was different from what I had known growing up in a small Midwestern town. It matured and deepened in college when I roomed with a second-generation Japanese American who was born in a stable at Santa Anita Racetrack on his way to a World War II internment camp in Poston, Arizona.

My roommate had a way about him that invited openness and manifested genuine interest in other human beings. He was a sensitive friend. Both of us had served as student leaders, grown up with deeply religious mothers, and shared a love of sports and history. The only real difference was that he was Japanese and I was Scotch-Irish-which ultimately was no difference at all. The more we talked, the more I realized what we held in common and the more familiar I became with his hopes, not of his race, but of himself as an individual.

Then, I would see how other people reacted to my roommate by consistently denying his individuality. I saw the hurt look on his face every time someone called him "Odd Job" after an Asian character in a James Bond movie and the anger he showed when the dean of students asked him to speak to the board of trustees about

the experience of a “foreign” student at Princeton. In search of his own identity, he knew he was American, but either from ignorance or prejudice, many white Americans seemed to deny him that birthright.

My roommate rarely talked about the camps, but partly as catharsis and partly as a service, in 1971 he wrote a book called *American in Disguise*. It told of how he spent his first few years in an internment camp and how he lived his entire life having to deal with racism in America. It was a sad, honest, angry, insightful, and accurate book. During the summer of 1971, he did a book tour. I accompanied him one evening to a call-in show at a TV station in St. Louis. I was not prepared for the hostility that followed:

Caller #1: “If Mr. Moto (not his name) doesn’t like America tell him to go back to Japan.”

Caller #2: “I don’t know why you’re complaining; you’ve done well in America.”

Caller #3: “I lost my husband at Pearl Harbor. You can’t trust these Japanese. How do we know what you say about these camps is true? I don’t trust you.”

Caller #4: “Tell the Japs they’re lucky that we didn’t drop another atomic bomb on them.”

Caller after caller spewed out an irrational hatred toward the Japanese. None apparently registered that my roommate was American, not Japanese. Their failure to appreciate his story was an extraordinary denial of the historical record. If a truth-teller didn’t “look” American -- i.e., caucasian -- it seemed he was not believed. It would not be the last time that I observed such reactions, and always it would be painful.

Even today in 1994, whites and blacks see different looking eyes and go blind to individuality, blurting out such comments as, “Why don’t you go back where you come from,” “We’re out of jobs because of you,” and “Hey, China doll.” In 1991, I heard the story of a Japanese American Girl Scout troop that was selling cookies outside a suburban grocery store in California. One passerby who refused to buy any said, “I only buy from American girls.”

To understand such an insensitive comment requires knowledge of the history of Asians in America. The 19th-century image of America as a melting pot did not include immigrants from Asia. The torch-bearing arm of the Statue of Liberty was raised toward the Atlantic and Europe. A similar welcome was not extended westward across the Pacific.

From the beginning, Asian Americans have been ostracized by white America. When California became a state in 1850, its Constitution made it legal for cities to expel and segregate Chinese. It also restricted employment of Chinese workers and denied Chinese the right to vote. Oregon and California did not ratify the 15th Amendment until the mid-20th century because their politicians rezoned that to support giving the vote to African Americans would necessitate enfranchising Chinese Americans. As a source of cheap and hardworking labor, Chinese by the 1870s became a favorite target of white labor legions that pushed for their ouster from the state. Congress responded by passing the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, making Chinese “aliens ineligible for citizenship,” stripping them of all legal rights, and prohibiting nearly all immigration of Chinese to the United States.

As Chinese immigration declined after the 1882 Act, the United States looked to Japan for cheap labor to work in the orchards and fields of the West Coast and Hawaii. Japanese success in agriculture led to a second anti-Asian backlash. In 1913, the California State Legislature passed the Alien Land Law, prohibiting aliens from buying land or leasing it for more than three years. Pressure from California officials led to the “Gentleman’s Agreement” of 1908 with Japan, in which both nations agreed to decrease Japanese immigration to the United States. In 1924, the Asian Exclusion Act barred all Japanese and other Asian immigration

for permanent residence. Other laws denied the Japanese citizenship, barred them from certain jobs, and kept them from marrying whites. These attitudes culminated in 1942 when war hysteria compounded historic racism and led to one of the sharpest blows to constitutional rights in the history of this country -- the internment, without evidence of disloyalty, of 120,000 Japanese Americans. In addition, Japanese Americans were asked specifically to forswear allegiance to the emperor of Japan. Gene Oishi has written that asking second-generation Japanese Americans to take a loyalty oath was "comparable to asking Joe DiMaggio, the son of Italian immigrants, to forswear allegiance to Mussolini."

Asian Indians were also included in America's anti-Asian xenophobia. Pursuant to the Naturalization Law of 1790, which said only whites could become citizens, the Supreme Court in 1923 stripped a Sikh from California of his citizenship on the basis that Hindus were not "free white men."

I know that these historical facts are painful for anyone who believes that pluralism is an American strength, but to ignore them would deny us a chance to get them behind us. Only coming to terms with them will free us.

Since the Immigration Act of 1965 eliminated national-origin quotas, we've seen a new era of Asian immigration. Asians are the fastest growing minority group in the country. In the 1980s, over 3 million Asians immigrated to America doubling the Asian American population. In New Jersey, the Asian American population grew 162 percent in the 1980s. Such waves of immigration make it more important than ever for us to see that we are no longer a society of just two races, and to understand that diversity is a basic component of what it means to be American. In the coming years, contributions to American society by Americans of Asian and Pacific descent will become increasingly important.

These recent immigrants from Asia differ significantly from their predecessors. Most now come as intact families with the intention of settling here permanently; about a third are professionals. Moreover, post-1965 Asian immigration has originated from more Asian countries. While immigrants from India, Korea and China have come to the United States in search of economic opportunities, others from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos have fled unstable political conditions in their home countries.

The vast differences in experience and perspective between the Hmong refugees from Laos, who arrived with no understanding of the concept of written language, and established fourth-generation Japanese Americans, whose families have been in the United States longer than many European groups, highlight the range of diversity in Asian America.

Despite this diversity, Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Filipino, Indian, Korean, and Cambodian Americans, along with Americans from the islands of Polynesia find themselves continually being clamped together and deemed as one unified group. To force the over 60 different Asian groups under one label is the height of ignorance and racial stereotyping and makes as much sense as calling a Scot a Euro-American.

One of the most prevalent stereotypes that ignores the diversity of Asian Pacific Americans is the "model minority myth" which says that "Americans of Asian descent are the 'healthy' minority, the 'smart' minority, the 'self-sufficient' minority; the 'hardworking, but silent' minority." In many respects, statistics back up the "model minority" stereotype: Asian Americans have the lowest divorce rate of any racial group, the lowest rate of teenage pregnancy, the highest median family income, and the lowest rate of unemployment. Moreover, the number of Asian-owned businesses increased by nearly 1,000 percent from 1972 to 1987.

But a report released last month also revealed that Southeast Asians have the highest rate of welfare dependency of any racial or ethnic group. More than 30 percent of all Southeast Asian households are on welfare, and among some groups, like Cambodians and Laotians in California, the percentage on welfare skyrockets to

77 percent.

Moreover, although the average family income for Asian Americans is on par with that of whites, the figures can be misleading. Asian Americans live disproportionately in areas where the cost of living is above the national average. High family income is also related to their relatively larger families.

Being classified a “problem-free minority” can also create tension with other minority groups. “Why can’t you be more like Asian Americans?” black and Latinos are told. As a result Asian Americans become the targets of anger, creating a backlash in their relationships with other groups of Americans. The greater the success of Asian Americans, the more some whites and some blacks resent them. When economic times are tough, the seemingly positive attributes of the “model minority” suddenly get turned against Asian Americans. Hardworking, resourceful, and dedicated suddenly become ruthless, diabolical, and fanatical.

Today, most blatantly discriminatory laws have been dismantled, but prejudice against Asian Americans remains, and phobic attitudes persist. For example, the taboo on interracial marriage dies slowly. It is cloaked in superstition, tribalism, and often just plain racism. How race should be prohibitive when two people fall in love has always been a mystery to me. Irrational attachment to race purity is found in all cultures, including some Asian societies, but in America it fused with bizarre theories about white supremacy to produce an explosive mix of emotion and law.

Today, many Asian Americans experience more subtle forms of intolerance. Height requirements, such as those still used by some police and fire departments, bar Asian Pacific Americans from many jobs. Many prestigious colleges have been accused of imposing new admission standards in order to limit the number of Asian American students. Glass ceilings in corporations block too much Asian American talent from fulfilling the potential of its abilities.

Asian Americans often become a convenient scapegoat. Take Japan-bashing as an example. With the recent failure of U.S.-Japan trade talks, it could reappear. The U.S. economy is experiencing monumental transformations -- the end of the Cold War, the influx of millions of new people into the world marketplace, the emergence of the knowledge revolution, and the continued build up of our national debt. Americans are understandably feeling vulnerable. Japan has erected barriers to its markets. Japan owes it to its consumers and to the world to open its markets. We must be clear and firm in our policy toward the Japanese government. But making Japan our scapegoat is not the answer. Inflammatory rhetoric helps no one. The Japan-bashing phenomenon becomes more and more disturbing with each politician’s slip of the tongue and each “Honda-bashing” party that the media covers. And what these critics of Japan must realize, given the disproportionate role of race in American society, is that anger towards Japan risks turning into hostility toward our fellow citizens. Increasingly, the brunt of anti-Japan sentiment falls not only on Japanese Americans, but, because many non-Asians fail to make a distinction among different Asian American nationalities, on Asian Pacific Americans as a whole. For example, the first highly publicized instance of brutal anti-Asian violence was the 1982 murder of Vincent Chin. Chin, a 27-year-old Chinese American, was bludgeoned to death in Detroit by two unemployed auto workers who blamed the layoffs in the auto industry on the Japanese.

Even with the increasing presence of Asian Americans in such areas as San Francisco, New York, Seattle, and New Jersey, Asian Americans are constantly questioned about their “Americanness.” Because they look different from caucasians, such as German-Americans, Irish-Americans, or Italian-Americans, they are often asked “where they are from” and told that they “speak English very well.” They are continually viewed and treated as foreigners. Maybe that’s why they’re often left out of discussion on race relations in America -- they, like my roommate years ago, are not even seen as Americans by a white majority and a black minority.

In its most frightening form, these attitudes result in racist violence. In 1987, a Cambodian American teenager

in Lowell, Massachusetts, was drowned by a youth shouting racial slurs. Also in 1987, a group of youths attacked and killed Navroze Mody, an Indian American man; the youths were affiliated with a group called the "Dotbusters," referring to the red dot many Indian women wear on their foreheads. In 1989, a Chinese American man named Ming Hai "Jim" Loo was beaten to death in Raleigh, North Carolina, by a number of white men who blamed him for the Vietnam War. In October 1992, a Chinese American man was beaten on a bus in San Francisco by five African American teenagers, who yelled "Chink" and "Get that Chinaman."

I have recently spoken out about the violence that is plaguing our country -- not just in our cities, but also in suburban malls, on college campuses and between husband and wife. While all violence must be condemned, a new wave of "hate violence" is particularly disturbing.

According to a 1992 report by the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, although Asians made up 4 percent of the population of Philadelphia in 1988, they were the victims in 20 percent of the city's hate crimes. In 1993 there were 335 reported anti-Asian incidents, including 30 homicides, or nearly one incident every day.

But Asian Pacific Americans are beginning to fight back. In 1988, Japanese Americans won a long and hard-fought battle to regain their dignity and rightful place as American citizens with the passage of the Civil Liberties Act. This legislation gave a national apology and monetary compensation to the surviving Japanese Americans who were unjustly taken from their homes on the West Coast and interned in camps, solely on the basis of their ancestry. Such open acknowledgement is true progress.

More recently, Bruce Ynmashita challenged one of the oldest institutions in the country: the U.S. military. In 1989, Yamashita, a third-generation Japanese American from Hawaii, fresh out of Georgetown University with graduate degrees in law and international relations, enrolled in the Marine Corps Officer Candidate School.

Yamashita's idealistic aspirations of serving his country were shattered when he was subjected to onslaughts of racial barbs and verbal abuse from his sergeant at OCS: "You speak English? We don't want your kind around here. Go back to your own country." Other superiors insisted on speaking to him in broken Japanese, often calling him by the names of Japanese products, such as "Kawasaki Yamaha Yamashita." One sergeant ordered him to change into a dirty uniform before his final company review board, knowing that it would jeopardize his evaluation. After nine weeks of OCS training and two days before graduation, Yamashita was kicked out for "unsatisfactory leadership."

Charging racial harassment and discrimination, Yamashita challenged his dismissal. After two Marine Corps reviews and an offer of commission that he found unsatisfactory, Yamashita appealed to President Clinton last fall for a full resolution of his case. In December 1993, Navy Secretary John Dalton overruled the Marines and authorized that Yamashita be commissioned as a captain. Five years after his ordeal began, at a March ceremony in the House of Representatives, Yamashita was commissioned as a captain in the standby reserves. No longer silent, Yamashita won his battle. Another step of progress.

Forcing people to fight for the right to be treated as human beings is a colossal waste of energy and talent. By the year 2000, only 57 percent of the people entering the work force will be native-born whites. It is their children whose economic future will increasingly depend on the talents of nonwhites. The considerable talents of Asian Americans will help all of us advance if we allow them not only a place at the table of performance, but also a place at the table of acceptance. To stigmatize, to stereotype, and to abuse Asian Americans is to deny ourselves the possibility of our best future.

Americans also need to see how our diversity is a peculiarly American strength, available to virtually no other nation. I was at a conference in Europe recently and the Europeans kept referring to Americans, Mexicans,

Canadians, Brazilians and Venezuelans as “New Worlders.” I asked them what they meant, and they said, “In Europe, increasingly, nationality is defined as ethnicity. In the New World it isn’t.” To which I say, Thank God. American nationality is creedal, not ethnic. We ask our citizens to subscribe to a set of principles etched in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, not to produce their pedigrees. No country is so open, and this is a source of tremendous strength. These rights, such as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, do not accrue only to a certain race or ethnicity, but to a qualified person of any race who steps forward and says “I’m American.”

Our growing Asian Pacific American population is one of the keys to our future success in the international marketplace. The Pacific Rim offers us unlimited opportunities for American export markets, not to mention potential partners in tackling the global problems of human rights, the environment, technology, and population control. In Asia, our immigrants can be our guide to the cultural rhythms of the fastest growing area in the world economy. Given competitive price and quality, that knowledge can give American goods the edge in Asia. If American companies can draw on the world for our talent, our pool will be much larger than it would be if we, like the Japanese, confined our talent search to a few universities and one racial stain. Our diversity can mean more jobs and more prosperity for all Americans if we can seize the moment. But to realize that promise, we have to see people -- not the color of their skin or the shape of their eyes -- for what they are as individuals and as Americans.

To encourage contributions to our nation’s future from Americans of Asian descent requires a commitment, from each of us, to get beyond the stereotypes. To move past simplistic discussions of race relations which only recognize black and white. To realize the depth and diversity of the many, different people we call Asian Pacific Americans. To reach out to the Asian American physicist in New Mexico, garment worker in San Francisco, doctor in New Jersey, restaurant owner in Chicago, and teacher in Los Angeles. To recognize that the surnames Nguyen, Patel, and Chang are just as American as Kennedy, Johnson, and Bush. To speak out against anti-Asian talk and violence when we hear or see it. To realize that contact brings understanding, and like my roommate in college, prejudice withers in an air of friendship. And when that happens, Americans from Asia will be a living, contributing, and integrated part of American life. And we will in every way be a richer society because of it.