

Valerie Garcia, runner-up essay

No one can say it was just another year of political jargon and mind-numbing election coverage. Maybe it was the most interesting political year that Americans have seen in decades. Election night was the media falsely claiming the presidential winner, Floridians demanding another vote, and poor Al and George lamenting in the amusing satires of Saturday Night Live. Yet, even within the frenzy of political miscues, the past year celebrated major breakthroughs for many. For Asian Americans, the past year marked a time of political growth and the awakening of a very powerful beast. The political arena needed to react, because Asian Americans were no longer the backseat campaign moneybags once thought out to be.

Perhaps the year did not start off on the best foot for the Asian American community. The American government seized Chinese American scientist, Wen Ho Lee, on the basis of espionage. The media jumped on the story with headlines broadcasting a foreigner threatening the security of the nation. Making generalizations came easy, due to images of the deviant Mafia in Chinatown, the Yellow Peril stocking up on war artillery, international students manipulating the university science labs, even Lucy Liu as Charlie's most dangerous Angel. Months later, the government's accusations unraveled and Wen Ho Lee, after all, is considered an American. Yet, what can be said about Asian Americans in general? Were we still foreigners in the public's eye?

The summer months in the nation's capital provided an answer. The Senate passed the Hate Crimes legislation where criminals face a greater punishment if their crime is based on factors like gender, race, and sexual orientation. For the Asian American community, this marks a strong message: hate is intolerable in this nation. The legislation assures Asian Americans that events such as the racist murder of Filipino American postal worker Joseph Ito will not be admissible. Even more, Asian American World War II veterans were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, the highest honor provided by the government. Although the awards were more than fifty years overdue, it signaled the appreciation of the greatest patriotic duty. The recognition just kept on going with the appointment of Norman Mineta to the Cabinet and Bill Lann Lee as Assistant Attorney General -- the first Asian Americans to ever hold such positions. Could there be a remake of the old classic with a new face: "Mr. Lee Goes to Washington"? The Asian American voice continues to grow in the political institution.

This energy was ignited across the country. Chicago's own Yellow Technicolor Tour with Asian American hip hop group, Pacifics, and Asian American spoken word group, I Was Born With Two Tongues, toured universities rhyming about pride and power. Their own response to the racist music group, The Bloodhound Gang, found its way onto several radio airwaves to "Raise the Fist." Director and University of Illinois alum, Ang Lee, blew box offices with his flick, Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon. He proved that Asian Americans were breaking Hollywood stereotypes.

The pervasive images of the Asian foreign spy were heightened with the Wen Ho Lee ordeal. The Asian American community became the scapegoat for nativist fear and resentment. But what better a way to respond than with the political beast that let loose this year. False perceptions could only be groundless, or at least challenged, because Asian Americans were not the foreign spies assumed to be. The past year's events sent the clear message that Asian Americans were loud, awake, and alive.