

Allen Eghrari, first place essay

At its inception, the United States was built on principles of freedom, justice, and liberty. A reaction to tyranny and oppression, its creation sought to bring change to centuries of inequity under the British monarchy. But no change is sudden; the growth and evolution of the United States has taken centuries and is still in a state of continual development. In the past year, however, this country has taken an additional step toward progress through the presidential appointment of two Asian Americans, Norman Mineta and Elaine L. Chao, to the Department of Transportation and the Department of Labor, respectively. The acceptance of Asian Americans in the government's high offices has influenced public opinion in many ways; most of all, it acknowledges the power of Asian Americans in the community and help break existing stereotypes regarding the social roles of those with Asian heritage.

For over a century, Asian influence has been overlooked in history books. As a result of the appointment, America is coming to terms with the fact that Asians are a crucial part of American government and have always been a rich part of American history. According to the PBS special *Ancestors in the Americas*, Chinese immigrants have been "invisible" in the American story, even though "their presence was pervasive and economically pivotal." It points out the simple fact that the Transcontinental Railroad was built largely with the work of Chinese laborers, yet none are to be found in celebratory pictures of its completion or in the pictures of workers found in archives. High positions in government, however, such as working on the presidential cabinet, cannot be ignored or overlooked. They don't have to attempt to make history; they are already making history with every proposition, with every day.

Moreover, the appointment of Asian Americans to such high positions means that they can directly influence public policy, which in turn can aid the community. In the past, governmental legislation often overlooked the needs of Asians in the United States, creating laws and regulations that brought harm to many Asians and their families. In 1983, over 1000 Filipino World War II veterans were denied U.S. citizenship and faced deportation. In 1996, welfare reforms that reduced federal support to refugees dramatically hurt the Asian American community. If the American government is representative of its people, it is only appropriate that Asians be appointed to positions of power. This past year, two presidents have provided that opportunity.

Specifically, President Clinton's appointment of Mineta as Secretary of the Department of Commerce has aided to relieve tensions in economic sectors where rivalries have grown strong and bitter hatred has ensued. For years, tension has grown over economic hardship and competition with Japanese automakers and electronics companies. The tragic beating and murder in 1982 of Vincent Chin, who was mistakenly to be Japanese, serves as a reminder of the danger of allowing such hatred to flow freely. Clinton's appointment of Mineta, therefore, served to quell the tension by providing a domain in which Americans would be forced to face their negative beliefs and successfully work with someone of Japanese origin.

Likewise, President Bush's appointment of Chao as Secretary of the Department of Labor has brought about its own advances in her field. In the past, a racist belief that Asian immigrants are "coming here and stealing our jobs" spurred numerous anti-immigration policies. Even today, hate crimes against Asian Americans often involve that thought. The position that Chao currently holds is one that will benefit the Asian community, but it will also bring Americans to terms with their current values and force them to rethink such racist opinions they may have had. Even she stated herself that she advocates a "strong and productive workforce in which everyone can participate...where jobs and opportunities are available for those leaving welfare" and "job training is accessible for those leaving welfare" and "job training is accessible for those left behind." One month into office, she has already begun the first steps.

Most of all, however, the appointment of Mineta and Chao signals a new movement in America for Asian Americans. No longer are they to be seen as supposedly quiet, reserved, and accepting of any situation that may come their way. No longer are they to be seen as supposedly remaining in a little corner of their own. These two individuals have shown that Asians play a large part in the American experience, that they have power and that they are an integral part of what America stands for. Mineta's previous position as mayor of San Jose and Chao's service as President of United Way America and Director of the Peace Corps were the first steps, and their presidential appointments have brought them out into the spotlight. America is finally waking up.