

The Difficulties in Being a Coalition

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Social Sciences 78C

April 24, 2003

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Many issues and problems that are present in society are not acknowledged unless someone is determined to bring about a change. Because they are not acknowledged, nothing is done to resolve or remedy them. Asian Americans have come a long way in presenting their concerns to the public and fighting for their civil rights. They have progressed from being invisible to the public, to becoming a group that has a strong voice within the political sphere. This voice was a result of ongoing battles to address concerns both within the Asian American community and outside of it as well. Two notable incidences involved the Taxi Workers Alliance and the Japanese American Citizens League. The Taxi Workers Alliance consists of both taxi drivers and non-taxi drivers that evolved from the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence, which in turn, grew from the Asian American movement associated with the Vincent Chin case.¹ The Japanese American Citizens League was founded in 1929 to encourage political participation in American-born Japanese. They are the largest civil rights group in the Asian American community with more than a hundred chapters across the United States.² These two coalitions have fought for different causes, while facing individual challenges in obtaining support from within their community or from the public, and struggling with the challenges of being misrepresented.

In 1998, outraged by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's proposed plan for cabdrivers, the Taxi Workers Alliance (TWA) began their fight to oppose the plan. Mayor Giuliani, in response to the increased number of accidents involving taxicabs between 1990 and 1996, proposed his seventeen-point plan that would rid the city of "reckless and lawless" drivers.³ A majority of these drivers were South Asian immigrants (mainly from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India) that

¹ Helen Zia, *Asian American Dreams: the Emergence of an American People* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 203, 231-232

² Zia, 231-232.

³ Zia, 202.

migrated to the United States during the 1980s, along with the working-class. These drivers led a hard life; burdened by their twelve hour long shifts spent finding fares to cover the leasing of the cab and for gas. Giuliani's plan, which involved tests and driving courses that would be at the drivers' expense, would cause those already in economic burden to be easily put out of work.

The difficulty of proving themselves opposite of their branded recklessness by the media and politicians was made more challenging since members of their own race did not support the cabdrivers; more specifically, the middle-class members. Since people from their own communities did not support them, it made the recklessness that they were accused of more credible, and thus made it harder for them to argue their case. The middle-class South Asian Americans did not have any compassion for the working-class South Asian Americans since the working-class had to do labor. The middle-class "had assimilated into American culture [and] also adopted and internalized the model minority status," leaving the lower-class South Asian Americans alone in their struggles.⁴ This mentality led the middle-class to believe that the "good image" they had worked hard to achieve was destroyed by the imposed characterization of cabdrivers as reckless beings. Furthermore, the middle-class South Asian Americans did not consider the working-class as Americans as they considered themselves to be.

Although class rankings were against the TWA, the generational differences of the South Asian Americans played to their advantage. The expectations on the 1.5 and second generation South Asian Americans imposed by their first generation parents greatly differed to the concerns and hardships the newer generation faced growing up as Asians in America. This difference enabled the 1.5 and second generation to have an understanding for what the cabdrivers were experiencing, and also helped shape their interest in civil rights. This newer generation, with their concern for social issues, provided support and much needed aid to the TWA.

⁴ Zia, 217.

However, the entire middle-class was not against the taxi drivers. The middle-class intellectuals from the Forum of Indian Leftists (FOIL) proved to be a crucial part in TWA's success. FOIL had access to college campuses and the Internet, which helped reach many "college-aged second generation" South Asian Americans.⁵ These college students provided help in distributing flyers to inform cabdrivers and those associated with them the intent of TWA—a one-day citywide strike on the thirteenth of May.

In May of 1993, "the Hawaii State Supreme Court ruled that people of the same sex had the right to be married."⁶ Since the Sansei leaders of the Hawaii's Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) chapter wanted the coalition to stay in the civil rights arena, they planned to join the debate on same-sex marriage that sprung from that ruling. They viewed this debate as a civil rights issue and the Sansei leaders persuaded the Hawaii chapter to support same-sex marriage. One of the major points used to convince the chapter was that the arguments made against same-sex marriage were similar to those that were used against interracial marriage. In Salt Lake City during August of 1994, the debate for the national organization to support the issue of same-sex marriage was discussed at JACL's national convention. Being the largest civil rights group in the Asian American community, JACL's vote to support the same-sex marriage issue influenced other Asian American advocates to consider whether to participate in this controversial issue.

However, the Hawaii JACL chapter had a major challenge, not in convincing other organizations and the public to support same-sex marriage, but rather they faced challenges in convincing the national JACL organization to support this controversial issue. The basic reasons presented against the Sansei leaders of the Hawaii chapter were that same-sex marriage is a moral issue, not a political one.⁷ Moreover, same-sex marriage has no correlation to the

⁵ Zia, 219.

⁶ Zia, 231.

⁷ Donna Tong, class section, 17 April 2003.

concerns of the coalition. Sansei leaders such as Bill Kaneko retaliated saying that the “issue is about government-sanctioned civil marriage, not religious recognition of freedom.”⁸ Many older generation members viewed marriage as a religious right. Therefore, supporting same-sex marriage would go against their religious beliefs. Furthermore, using the Japanese concentration camps as an underlying example, the newer generation expressed the need to help a group that was being denied their rights as the Japanese Americans had been denied theirs during World War II. They hoped that this scar within the Japanese American community would evoke a realization and sense of sympathy for homosexuals.

The JACL would not have been involved in the same-sex debate if it were not for its 1.5 and second generation leaders and members. The third generation Japanese Americans wanted JACL to possess a stronger voice in national public policy, which fueled the Sansei leaders of the Hawaii chapter to persuade JACL to support same-sex marriage. Fortunately, the majority of the national board were also third generation, having the same outlook as those leaders in Hawaii. The national board members supported the Hawaii chapter and helped convince the national organization to support same-sex marriage. However, the generation gap between these new leaders and the older, conservative first generation would ultimately result in JACL’s split.⁹

Although TWA and JACL involved different groups of Asian Americans and both had different coalition motives, members from both coalitions faced the challenge of being misrepresented.¹⁰ The misrepresentation of the cabdrivers was the catalyst to the formation of the TWA. The majority of accidents the media reported involved taxis, which resulted in the stereotype that all service vehicle accidents were caused by reckless taxi drivers. Bhairavi Desai, a member of the TWA, mentions that the ongoing “bashing of the taxi drivers by the media and

⁸ Zia, 239.

⁹ Donna Tong, class section, 17 April 2003.

¹⁰ Donna Tong, class section, 17 April 2003.

the politicians” caused the public to view “the taxi driver [as] a bad person” who should be punished.¹¹

Within the Asian American society, homophobia produced the idea that homosexuals were non-existent within this society. When same-sex relationships were found, however, those who were involved were usually shunned and abandoned by their family and extricated by their community. This threat of banishment caused homosexuals to stay deeper within their closets which caused examples of homosexuality within the community harder to find. Thus, the image that homosexuals were non-existent in the Asian American community was further promoted. Consequently, the older members did not see how the controversial issue of same-sex marriage related to the Asian American community. They believed that JACL should not be involved in any movement or political cause that is not affiliated with Asian Americans.

The Taxi Workers Alliance and the Japanese American Citizens Leagues confronted many challenges during the fight for their respective causes. The TWA had to deal with the lack of support from their middle-classed “brethren” while the Hawaii chapter of JACL wrestled with their national organization to support same-sex marriage. Coincidentally, both coalitions were influenced by generational gaps between the older, conservative generation, and the more politically involved 1.5 and second generation. Despite the misrepresentation put on the Asian Americans, the TWA and Hawaii JACL chapter continued to fight for what they believed in. Although only the Taxi Workers Alliance succeeded in the end, both coalitions created an everlasting impression of Asian Americans in society. They contributed in the strong voice Asian Americans will later possess within the political sphere.

¹¹ Zia, 202.