UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND AT COLLEGE PARK
DEPARTMENT OF AMERICAN STUDIES

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Dear Yuri

How are you? Hope all is well. I am teaching Asian American History at the University of Maryland while working on my Asian American book, speaking and writing on multicultural topics, and performing pro-bono legal work for the Native American community here and in the Amazon.

Enclosed are a copy of my course syllabus and other materials that may be of interest. Sorry for the impersonal nature of this letter, but I wanted to catch up on my correspondance as quickly as possible.

Have a happy holiday season, and please keep in touch.

Sincerely yours,

Phil

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Here, at last, is the Malcolm X piece. The longer version mentions you as one of my role models. Thanks for always "being there" for me + for others!

P.

Voices

Ideas and opinions from the Asian Pacific American community

Where are the Asian American Malcolm X's?

Looking for leaders in Asian America

BY PHIL TAJITSU NASH

Thank you for inviting me here to speak with you today. I am especially pleased to see so much activism on campus, and hope that my speech will further your interest in serving the Asian American community in the years to come.

I have been asked to address the topic, "Where are the Asian American Malcolm X's?" This is a good question, and one that I would like to address by asking five related questions:

First, what are we really looking for when we ask the question?

When we ask this question, we are possibly looking for one of three things: a leader, a savior, or a roadmap. Let me explain. Looking for a leader seems ridiculous, given the many fine leaders we have in the Asian American community in politics, law, education, health, science, business, arts. However, given what various commentators have referred to as our national anxiety, spiritual hunger, economic fears, and political cynicism, it is natural to look for someone, of any background, who can lead us to better times. This then leads to the second thing Malcolm X represents: a savior.

Even without a savior, this culture of easy answers has made many of us search for a road map or anything that will lead us out of this quagmire of difficulties. We want to be handed a money-back guaranteed plan, or even a magic wand, to help us solve the racial issues that affect not only African Americans and Asian Americans, but all people in this country.

Second, are there any charismatic Asian American leaders—yesterday or today—who work for civil rights and who personify the aspirations, ideals, rage, and pride of our community?

The simple answer is yes, of course. Let's start by taking a brief look at Asian American history. Some of my own heroes include those in the 19th century who brought the great legal challenges to discriminatory immigration, labor, and citizenship laws. Their cases included *Yick Wo v. Hopkins*, which brought equal protection to Chinese laundries in San Francisco and *U.S. v. Wong Kim Ark*, which affirmed the right of those born on American soil of foreign parents to be American citizens.

Another group of charismatic leaders includes political leaders who studied or sought political exile in this country before going back to Asia to lead or sustain major political revolutions. They include Sun Yat Sen, who overthrew the Manchus in 1911, and Ho Chi Minh, who lived in Chicago and Harlem and who later went on to lead the Vietnamese resistance to French and American colonial incursions.

In the 20th century, many valiant leaders such as the Heart Mountain Draft Resisters fought the internment of Japanese Americans, while others fought discriminatory land, labor, and education laws.

Within the lifetimes of people in this room are some recent leaders who did inspirational things. On this very day, we can find charismatic leaders involved in national politics and local activists taking the lead in community issues.

In short, we have no lack of leaders. But due to a lack of press exposure, and perhaps due to an Asian American ethos that discourages "the nail that sticks up," none has the national stature of a Malcolm X, Frederick Douglass, W.E. B. DuBois, or Fanny Lou Hamer. Our leaders seem to be leaders related to an issue, a part of the community, or a geographic locality.

Third, what do we really mean by "Malcolm X"?

Even the words "Malcolm X" represent different things, depending on whom you ask. To some, he is a myth. For others, Malcolm is a person with strengths and flaws who personified a turbulent past, a radical transformation, and hope for the future. He was, no doubt, a self-taught, galvanizing speaker, a visionary, and a person who transcended his group and his historical moment by becoming deeply rooted in the issues of his time.

Malcolm was a man who personified the aspirations, idealism, principles, rage, courage, self-sacrifice, and pride of many African Americans during the civil unrest of the 1960s. While vilified by those who control the media, he offered a beacon of hope for the truly oppressed of all backgrounds.

Fourth, how would we go about finding an Asian American Malcolm X?

If we believed that an Asian American Malcolm X was out there, just waiting to be discovered, what would we look for? Malcolm was a product of his people, so we'd have to start by looking at the history and current situation of Asian Americans. Any leader would probably already be serving as a leader of something, whether on campus or in the community. However, the Asian American community does not have the levels of homogeneity seen in the African American community of the early 1960s. "Asian Pacific American," which I refer to here as "Asian American," is a place-holding designation, and not a scientific category. The fragmentations in this group make it hard for any leader to be seen as a leader across boundaries of ethnicity, national origin, language, and class.

And finally, what are the lessons of this inquiry?

Coming to my fifth and final question, let's look at the five lessons of this inquiry. First, this search for an Asian American Malcolm X forces us to rethink definitions of "leadership." We must be more supportive of those building organizations and movements, not just those who enjoy basking as unaccountable individuals in the spotlight of media attention. We must recognize our many capable women as well as men. We must move away from a societywide ethos that celebrates individuals while giving less credit to the social change functions provided by organized unions, organizations, and coalitions.

The second lesson of this inquiry, especially in this campaign year, is that our disparate organizations need to pool resources and talent to help promote some of our bright, younger leaders as "community spokespersons" who can respond quickly to the media.

The third lesson is that we must forget about notions of great saviors with instant answers who can save the day in minutes or hours. Social change is slow, hard work that happens unevenly and incrementally.

The fourth lesson is that each of us must know our own histories. We must understand our own families, groups, communities, and nation before we can step onto the world stage as a leader. We must take the time to understand the suffering of others, so that our own suffering will not be in isolation.

Part of that history can come from books but the deeper, more important history comes from your own family and neighbors. Start by doing oral histories of your parents. Help them to make explicit the implicit lessons that they hope you will learn from the struggles of their lives.

Finally, if there is any lesson we can take from this search for an Asian American Malcolm X, it is this: each of us, to truly have lived, must learn about and participate in the great issues of our time. Even if it means organizing your student group to take a stand supporting affirmative action, or helping those younger than you to make it to college, start each day planning to bring activism, not cynicism to the world.

"Seize the time," as one of Malcolm's contemporaries said, and do whatever you can today to make the world a better place. Live your politics, breathe your idealism.

Some of you in this room may turn out to be as influential as Malcolm X. But every one of you has the ability, if you have the will, to be an effective leader in small- or large-scale efforts to make the world a better place. If you combine humility and vision with your youthful energy, intellect, commitment, and concern, then you will make a difference. For the sake of our children's children's children, I hope you will.

Phil Tajitsu Nash teaches history at the University of Maryland and was the founding executive director of the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium in Washington. The preceding essay was excerpted from remarks he will present this weekend at the East Coast Asian Students Association conference in Washington, and from his forthcoming book, Asian Americans: America's 'Colored' Class. *(Copyright 1996 by P.T. Nash.)*

Minefield Dancer

by Phil Tajitsu Nash

A sure sign of having arrived as an author is when more people have an opinion about you and your work than have actually *read* your work. If such is the price of fame, Dinesh D'Souza is anything but sorry. In 1987, he burst into the arena of American identity politics with *Illiberal Education*, a bracing attack on affirmative action in university admissions, which became as hotly contested a polemic as Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*. His most recent work, *The End of Racism*, a rejection of the notion of institutionalized racism in American society, has made him one of America's most sought-out "experts" on race, and one of Asian America's most famous—and most controversial—faces. **Phil Tajitsu Nash**, founding executive director of the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium and author of a forthcoming book examining Asian Americans as America's equivalent of South Africa's "colored class," visited D'Souza at home to get to know the person behind the pundit.

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What do Americans today owe blacks because of slavery? Probably nothing [because]...slavery proved to be the transmission belt that nevertheless brought Africans into the orbit of modern civilization and Western freedom, so that future generations of black Americans would be far more free and prosperous than their former kinsmen in Africa. [Therefore], if America as a nation owes blacks as a group reparations for slavery, what do blacks as a group owe America for the abolition of slavery?

—Dinesh D'Souza,
The End of Racism

A warm smile and a cup of peppermint tea greet me as I enter Dinesh D'Souza's suburban Washington home. Beyond the white sculptured lions and green Dartmouth doormat that guard the entranceway, the front foyer is framed by Doric columns and views into two elaborately-decorated rooms, where prints of French impressionist paintings fill the walls behind floral print furniture. On the walls are pictures of his adorable 11-month-old baby and his wife, Dixie, who was born in Louisiana, raised in California, and studied international relations and politics at George Washington University. Prominently displayed are souvenirs of their wedding, which was attended by many of the conservative political celebrities he met while working as a wunderkind policy aide in the Reagan White House.

In one room, sets of formal china are stacked neatly in glass cabinets, and chairs are pushed back against the walls. In another room is a device that allows the toddler to jump around while keeping it safely restrained. In the kitchen, D'Souza's open briefcase lies on a counter, next to a well-worn copy of today's *Washington Post*. A half-finished cup of tea sits next to the first, and only, material hint I see of his Indian heritage: an unopened bag of sweet Rajbhog crackers.

"The idea that American blacks are being held back from achieving their aspirations because someone gave them a dirty look, or a cab driver wouldn't pick them up at Penn Station, it is ridiculous."

Dinesh D'Souza is a personable man in his mid-thirties who describes himself as, "a social critic, a young scholar with a unique background and perhaps a unique perspective." He is every bit as friendly and loquacious in person as he appears to be on television. Wearing a white shirt with thin red stripes, green Dartmouth tie, and dark loafers, he looks like the Wharton Business School student he almost became. And, while he's clearly someone of Indian ancestry, many people apparently do not think of him as Asian American, perhaps because of his Portuguese-derived surname.

Yet D'Souza, author of *Illiberal Education*, *The End of Racism*, and the forthcoming *What's So Great About Western Civilization?* is the most visible Asian American in America's ongoing debates on race. With the backing of the conservative Olin Foundation and the well-financed American Enterprise Institute, he frequently publicizes his views on radio, television, and in many of the most influential journals. With only a B.A. degree, he verbally jousts with Ph.D.s at elite schools. He touts free enterprise and individual responsibility in ways that are like other Republican policy analysts, but also strays into attacks that even his conservative colleagues label as "polemical" and "unscholarly."

"Racial victimization supplies a license for bigotry which is disguised as a campaign for equality and social justice. It is no surprise, therefore, that white racism seems less overt and less threatening to the life chances of other groups, while black racism is more explicit and more menacing."

—The End of Racism

D'Souza grew up as a Christian minority in Bombay, where his family migrated after leaving the Goa region of India's southwest coast, where the Portuguese held a colony for 450 years. His parents, whom he describes as "a chemical engineer and a housewife, who are very quiet, non-controversial people," raised three children—Dinesh, a brother who is currently a Merchant Marine officer, and a sister who is "a housewife with two children"—in a small, middle class, professional community.

D'Souza attended Spanish Jesuit schools, where he learned both the history of India and the history of England. He came to the United

States to attend his final year of high school, enrolled at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, worked in New Jersey and then Washington after graduation, and ultimately became a citizen here in 1991.

Asked about his parents' reaction to his controversial persona here in the United States, D'Souza says, "I never dreamed that I would become intensely involved in politics, much less become a figure of controversy. I don't see myself that way in person. I am very non-confrontational. So, my parents were initially mystified and puzzled. I think they now feel that what I am doing is speaking my mind, and they are happy that I have the courage of my convictions. I think that they are still bewildered about what the whole American debate is about."

Like many immigrants, who identify more with a region or city than a nation, D'Souza did not think of himself as "Indian" while growing up. In a recent interview, he said, "When I was growing up, I did not even think of myself as Indian. I identified with my town, with my school, with my family. Once I came to the United States, I began to think of myself as Indian, because my Indian identity stood out in contrast with the existing culture."

Recognizing that Asian Americans have been brought together into a politically-created category, D'Souza still sees that Asian Americans ("Asians," as he refers to them) have common values that often contrast with the values of other Americans. Among them, he cites "thrift, hard work, high emphasis on education, high orientation toward entrepreneurship and small business, a low degree of reliance on the government, and also what I would call an assimilationist ethic." By contrast, his image of African Americans is quite the opposite. "Slaves developed widely different personalities on the plantation: the playful Sambo, the sullen 'field nigger,' the dependable Mammy, the sly and inscrutable trickster," he explains. "Some of these personality types are still recognizable."

Although D'Souza acknowledges that jazz and blues are significant African American achievements, D'Souza goes on to say that "American blacks have also developed certain cultural traits that, while they are an adaption to historical oppression, they are, in some ways, dysfunctional. By that I mean that they are an obstacle to blacks competing effectively with other groups and claiming their share of the American dream. African Americans have a culture that exhibits a high tendency toward racial paranoia, an extraordinarily high degree of reliance on the government, a hostility toward academic achievement which is sometimes dismissed as acting white, a high tolerance for violence which has taken a very high toll on black communities, and, finally, the normalization of illegitimacy."

"Racism is a problem. But it is no longer the main problem," he concludes. "The idea that American blacks are being held back from achieving their aspirations because someone gave them a dirty look, or a cab driver wouldn't pick them up at Penn Station, it is ridiculous. I don't deny the existence of racism, and my book is full of many examples of it, but it no longer has the systemic power it once did to control the every day lives of blacks, or anyone else."

"[We must] recognize first of all that racism comes in all colors. Second, there is racism from above and racism from below. Racism from above is the guy who says, 'I am superior to you because of my race.' This has been the historic problem. Which is to say that whites have historically thought of themselves as intrinsically superior because their civilizational accomplishments in the last 500 years have, in material terms, outfaced those of other groups. There has been a mistaken tendency to identify this with natural superiority. So, racism historically is a top-down problem.

"On the other hand, I think that what we are seeing now is what I would call 'racism from below.' Which is to say that groups that are failing in America, and particularly I would say poor blacks, blacks in the underclass, inner city blacks, many of them see other groups coming to this country...and not oppressing blacks, but outcompeting them. They are setting up grocery stores, they are setting up rotating credit associations, and, for historic reasons, many black leaders find it unbelievable that black failure is due to anything other than white racism or exploitation. In fact, these groups [Jews, Asian Americans, and Caribbean blacks] have no history of exploiting [American] blacks, and in fact are doing nothing other than pursuing the cultural strategies that, if [American] blacks pursued them, they would be far better off."

"Far from being proof of a distinctive American evil, racism is a peculiar reflection of the moral conscience of America, and of the West. It reflects the oppressor's need to account for the betrayal of his highest ideals. Despite the ignominious career of racism as a justification for exploitation, in all of human history, only the white man has felt compelled to provide such a justification. Paradoxically, those who indulged in racism thereby revealed their humanity, even as they disregarded the humanity of others."

—The End of Racism

As I try to find Asian Americans to comment on D'Souza's writings, I find that few on either side of the ideological spectrum have actually read any. Among Asian American Republicans, one person who had read D'Souza was Susan Au Allen, head of the Pan Asian

American Chamber of Commerce. "Dinesh gives us a lot to consider," she says. "I have come to rely on his statistics in *Illiberal Education* to support my arguments for equal-opportunity affirmative action instead of preferential-treatment affirmative action. I'm still reading *The End of Racism*, but so far I have found a lot of merit in the book. Those whose terminology it offends are sometimes those who haven't read it."

D'Souza says he plans to respond to his critics in a systematic way, in the preface to the paperback edition of *The End of Racism*, due out next fall. Meanwhile, criticism of *The End of Racism*, including charges of factual distortion and inaccuracy, continues to fall hard and heavy, especially from academic circles.

"D'Souza wants the authority and publicity given to a scholarly expert, but does not want the responsibility that goes with it," says law professor Robert Chang, author of the forthcoming *Dis-Oriented: Asian Americans, Law, and the Nation-State*. "He takes the arguments of his opponents and, using incomplete facts and logical jumps, turns them around 180 degrees. Even a conservative scholar who had to come up for tenure at a reputable school could not get away with unrefereed scholarship like this."

One scholar who has debated D'Souza is Ron Takaki, author and professor of ethnic studies at the University of California at Berkeley. "Both D'Souza's *The End of Racism* and Charles Murray's *The Bell Curve* blame African Americans themselves for the inequalities they face," Takaki observes. "Murray blames biology, while D'Souza bashes the cultural deficiency of underclass blacks. Both dismiss and overlook racism and economic structures as causes of black inequality.

"Of the two books, D'Souza's is the more pernicious," he continues. "I think Murray's book evoked disbelief and a scientific refutation, but D'Souza's cultural explanation is more elusive and also resonates among Americans who want to reaffirm the American Dream and its ideal of meritocracy. Moreover, his cultural argument echoes the myth of the Asian-American model minority: the view that we made it because of our cultural values of hard work, family, and education. But this perception stereotypes Asian Americans into a homogeneous lumping together, shrouding continuing inequalities as well as the complex reasons why some of us as individuals and groups have done relatively well. In the end, both African Americans and Asian Americans become victims of this kind of one-dimensional, simplistic punditry."

Perhaps the most heated rejection of D'Souza's work came from a fellow conservative (and former colleague at the American Enterprise Institute) Glenn Loury, professor of economics at Boston University. Loury, one of the most prominent African American academics in the country, was so incensed at some of the ideas expressed in *The End of Racism*, and at AEI's endorsement of the book, that he resigned from AEI. "This is not a scholarly book; it is a polemic with an argument often tendentious and incomplete, and a tone frequently snide," he wrote in his resignation memo to AEI. "It substitutes name-calling aimed at serious scholars for evidence which refutes these scholars's claims."

Outside the academy, Asian American activists also have strong reactions (pro and con) to D'Souza's work. "D'Souza is dishonest and inconsistent," says Margaret Fung, head of the New York–based Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund. "He feels that it is all right to have civil rights laws to fight individual discrimination, but doesn't want to address systemic discrimination issues. He uses the gains of the last 30 years of affirmative action as an excuse to dismantle affirmative action programs and go back to 500 years of affirmative action for white propertied men." In Fung's eyes, D'Souza is a wolf in sheep's clothing. "He is a cordial, charming tool of the radical right, using anecdotes and incomplete facts to hide his elitist, insidious agenda," she charges. "Like another recent immigrant, Peter Brimelow, who bashes immigrants in *Alien Nation*, D'Souza betrays his own insecurities by protesting too much, too loudly."

Matt Finucane, head of the Washington-based Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance, also finds D'Souza's arguments dangerous. "It is hypocritical to tell black children that something is wrong with them, while Republicans on the Hill are enacting programs to place more of them into poverty," he says. "The saddest part is that I don't even hear people addressing the distortions in this book here in Washington, because there have been so many attacks lately on the poor and people of color by Gingrich and his cronies."

While reactions to D'Souza's writings within the Indian American community appear to be mixed, Dr. Alakananda Paul, who teaches electrical engineering and works on behalf of women's rights issues in the Washington, D.C. area, isn't equivocal about her feelings. "D'Souza does *not* represent the voice of Indian Americans," she declares. "I find it quite troubling that an immigrant of color, who has very likely benefitted from affirmative action, would like to deny the same opportunities to women and minorities. In his writings, he selectively uses quotes from others, including white supremacists, to support his racist theories."

Racism is "an opinion, which may

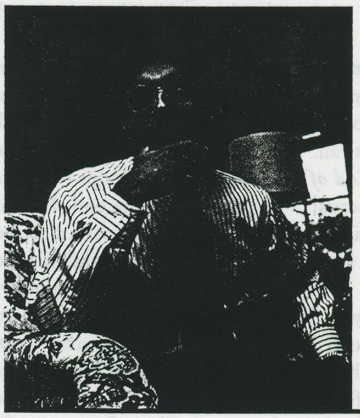
be right or wrong, but which in any case is a point of view that should not be argued with and not suppressed. Antiracist education is largely a waste of time because it typically results in intellectual and moral coercion."

—The End of Racism

D'Souza not only seems unfazed by the charges of his critics, he seems to delight in the rhetorical blows that rain on his head for his daring to say the unsayable. "Fortunately...I have high enough self-esteem that [criticisms have] not wounded me at all," he says. "I see that the book is clearing a mine field of taboos, and I am dancing through the mine field and bombs are going off. At the end of it, I might be missing a finger or a toe, but at least the mine field will be cleared. That is my hope."

In light of this irony, and his off balance defense of even the racist aspects of Western culture, it is intriguing to consider the contradictions he grew up with. As part of a Christian minority in post-Independence Hindu India, his parents wanted to be, in his own words, "Western in religious terms and Indian in patriotic terms." In Jesuit schools, he found a place where he could be part of the dominant religion, not a minority. At Dartmouth, where he edited a right-wing independent newspaper and won national acclaim from conservatives for attacking multiculturalism and affirmative action, he gained acceptance and celebrity that led to posts at the Reagan White House and conservative bastions such as the Heritage Foundation and AEI. As if to keep his detractors blinking, D'Souza, along with his wife, Dixie, is now working on what he describes as "an introduction to the great works of non-Western cultures."

"I think that much of existing multiculturalism is very idealogical," he says. "On the other hand, there are great works of history, literature and philosophy that have been published in Asia and Africa and Latin America. Our book will be an anthology of readings. Selections, with our introductory comments." While neither D'Souza nor his wife have formal training in this topic, they already have a plan. "Instead of studying for ten years about [a topic], I formulate the tough questions I want to answer and then I go to the best people in the field. I sit down and grill them," he explains. "I've got to learn from people who know. For the book on non-Western classics, my strategy is to identify a dozen or so people who are experts on these areas, bring them to the American Enterprise Institute for a day, and have a brainstorming session on what are the works and excerpts I should draw from."



"D'Souza wants the authority and publicity given to a scholarly expert, but does not want the responsibility that goes with it," says law professor Robert Chang.

[Multiculturalism is] an obstacle to true cultural understanding, and implants in students an unjustified hatred of the liberal institutions of their society.

—The End of Racism

D'Souza also plans to work on a book tentatively called *What's So Great About Western Civilization?* "It will look at how the West has come to dominate the last half millenium," he says, "and it is also a book about whether this domination is likely to continue, or has it come to an end." It's a peculiar question for a young man who has made a name out of justifying the dominant position of Western civilizaiton at a time when such a view is widely challenged both within and outside academe.

While D'Souza sees himself as someone who transcended neo-conservatism to become a bold thinker in his own right, his critics dismiss him as someone who traded on his non-White status to gain the support of conservative groups such as the Olin Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute. Being neither black nor white in a society with a bipolar view of race, he personifies the dilemma facing all Asian Americans: They, like South Africa's infamous "colored" class, must submit to and support a racially unjust staus quo as the price of conditional acceptance as "model minorities."

"Although D'Souza is very much an individualist, he also is a product of and participant in a right-wing agenda," says Margaret Fung, head of the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, "Unfortunately, because Asian Americans are being sought out to further this agenda, if he had not stepped forward, the role he plays would have been filled by another Asian American." ■