

## Chapter 13

# Diversity Within a Common Agenda

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Throughout much of this book, the term diversity is used to highlight the internal heterogeneity within the Asian Pacific American population, but, as we discuss later, this term also has a much deeper political and philosophical meaning. Economic and political changes over the past several decades have spawned marked disparities within this population. International migration patterns, U.S. domestic and foreign policies, transnational capital flows, and mobilization of social resources have contributed to the emergence of sizable segments at both ends of the income and earnings spectrum. While some Asian Pacific American groups experience the highest public assistance usage rates among any ethnic groups in the United States, other Asian Pacific American groups have a disproportionately high number of health professionals, scientists and engineers. We cannot escape the challenge of meeting the needs of the rapidly growing and diverse Asian Pacific American population. While the internal diversity is important to our policy discussion, this final chapter is concerned with a different issue.

The term diversity has another meaning that brings into question what is the very nature of this country and what it should aspire to become. The moral fabric of the nation has been constructed upon the political philosophy of liberalism and the rights of individuals. However, the nation's polity and economy have historically distributed rights and rewards differentially among ethnic, racial, and gender groups. The

legacies of historic inequalities and racial policies remain to this day. This divergence between political philosophy and historical practice creates a conundrum for public policy.

By the very nature of this book, which focuses on Asian Pacific American concerns, we are drawn into this broader debate. In exploring policy issues that Asian Pacific Americans face in various sectors of the U.S. economy, the writers incorporate ethnic factors into their analyses and recommendations. They document differences in history, culture, social resources, educational attainment and a host of other factors that have created a set of issues that have bearing on policy debates. And they argue for fuller membership for Asian Pacific Americans in the U.S. economy. In making these points, the writers implicitly, and in some cases explicitly, argue that group concerns and needs based on historic and contemporary experiences mediated by race and ethnicity should be considered in public policy.

The demand for incorporating ethnic concerns into public policy inevitably pulls the discussion into the arena of racial politics. Some key issues of this politics must be confronted if we are to move beyond polemics. Some argue that race-conscious policies are divisive. South Africa's system of apartheid and the bloody interethnic fighting in the Balkan states are certainly painful examples of how racial or ethnic-specific policies can undermine a country's moral legitimacy and tear away at human relations. We are not free from such divisions. There are racist groups in the United States that advocate for fragmenting this country.

Being conscious of race is not, fortunately, synonymous with racial divisions. It is an acceptance of the reality that race plays powerful roles in shaping individuals' life chances in our society. We have inherited institutions that produce and reproduce inequality by social grouping. Moreover, we have had a history of policies which has created a *de jure* and *de facto* system of privileges based on race. Although it has been fashionable to assert that recent policies have harmed white males, the historic record shows that government policies have done just the opposite over the life span of our nation.

So-called "color blind" policies ignore this unpleasant reality of race in the United States and run the risk of con-

tributing to the maintenance of inequality. The moral question is whether this nation should take an active role in eliminating racial, ethnic, and gender inequality. The contributors to this volume have answered in the affirmative. The solution, however, is not as simple as conferring privileges upon marginalized groups. Such an approach proves to be short-sighted, generates perverse outcomes, and creates political backlash. We must insist on undertaking the more difficult task of transforming some very basic institutions and attitudes.

While sharing the above concern over rectifying racial inequality, policies that incorporate ethnic experiences have another goal: harnessing diversity for a common good. As the world becomes more integrated, our ability to interact constructively with other nations hinges on our own cultural resources. Given our diverse population, the United States has the potential of developing an understanding of multiculturalism — different ways of knowing, interacting, communicating, and governing — unmatched by other nations. The policy of embracing differences in language, values, and cultural practices as opposed to homogenizing everyone can be especially helpful in the arena of international trade and exchange. There are also domestic benefits derived from a cultural richness rooted in diversity in the arts, entertainment, food, and other areas of daily life. These benefits are difficult to quantify in economic terms but are recognized and appreciated by most. Ultimately, promoting diversity is not so much about preserving any one particular culture as it is about creating a positive multiethnic society.

Holding a rational discussion on ethnicity and diversity in the policy arena is often difficult. Many politicians shy away from a discussion of race for fear of being charged with catering to special interests. Some supporters of diversity have only a shallow understanding of the issues and are thus unable to articulate and defend their position. They become easy prey to those who make charges of “political correctness.” The campaign for “political correctness” has served to undermine the support for cultural diversity and racial equality.

While we must accept the challenge of harnessing our multiethnic heritage, we must also be willing to discuss the core principles that we should share as a society. These principles

provide the philosophical foundations upon which public policies are debated. This book has taken up this task in implicit and explicit forms. It would be a mistake to dismiss this book as an effort merely to promote narrow group interests, make claims on the government, or seek special privileges. The authors speak, at times passionately, about a broader national agenda and the underlying principles that should guide us. Their recommendations would help this nation achieve societal goals consistent with universal and fundamental principles shared by most Americans. Four principles, in particular, apply to economic policies.

The first is the principle of fairness — that is, everyone should have the same chance to participate in the economy and to enjoy the protection and benefits offered by the state. In practice, this means that demands, such as that to eliminate the glass ceiling, should not be based on a desire to promote individual gains but should be based on the desire to achieve fairness. Through legislation and the court system, this nation has adopted the position that discrimination based on race is undesirable and constitutionally illegal. What to do beyond legal proscriptions against discrimination has become controversial. There are disagreements regarding the extent to which government should act to rectify past actions and whether we should ensure equality of outcomes. There have been, no doubt, problems and shortcomings with some policies enacted to increase racial equality. However, whatever flaws that exist should not be used as justification for abandoning the fight for fairness.

The second principle of humanitarianism posits a concern about the economic welfare of all residents. This means that we should not accept the disgraceful rise of poverty, the existence of urban slums, and crushing hardships associated with low-wage work. These problems are grave among Asian Pacific Americans, and are particularly severe among African Americans and Latinos. Despite the slowdown of growth created by increased foreign competition and economic restructuring over the last two decades, we still remain one of the wealthiest nations in the world. This nation possesses the resources to tackle these problems. Unfortunately, this country is politically divided around the means to achieve this.

Compassion and sense of social responsibility are frequently checked by a fear of "welfare cheats" and by individual greed. The appropriate policy must balance the objectives of protecting the economic welfare of individuals and promoting individual responsibility in ways that allow people to maintain their dignity. The difficulties in achieving these oftentimes conflicting objectives should not dissuade us from pursuing this principle. As stated earlier, our willingness to eliminate gross economic injustices is a measure of our character as a caring nation.

The third principle is government efficiency, where we maximize the returns on our taxes in the interest of the public good. This requires that publicly supported programs are cost-effective and that mechanisms for determining priorities allow for public accountability. With our culturally diverse population, we must have programs that are sensitive to the needs and concerns of various groups. It is important that programs do not create artificial barriers as a result of language or other differences. Otherwise, many programs are doomed to failure or achieve only minimal success. Increasing government efficiency should not be limited to public-sector reform, as government cannot do all. Many goals can be achieved only through a partnership between government and other societal sectors, where the synergy between parties generates larger gains than can be produced separately. While the public-private partnership has received much attention, there must also be stronger partnerships between the government and social and community institutions.

The fourth principle is ensuring economic viability. Political and business leaders boast of U.S. economic industriousness and the drive of citizens to create a better material world for each successive generation. The economic greatness of the United States is being challenged as never before, not only by increased international competition but also by diminishing natural resources and growing environmental costs. Prospering in this new setting will require a more productive and innovative labor force. This can be achieved by ensuring that today's workers, Asian Pacific American and otherwise, receive the training needed to be competitive and that they are given the opportunity to make maximum use of their talents. At the

same time, we must be willing to increase current investments in education, health and technology for the future.

Cynics would point out that the United States has more often violated these principles than has upheld them, particularly in the case of fairness and humanitarianism with respect to minority populations. Historically, only those considered full members of American society and worthy individuals enjoyed the opportunities and privileges of this nation. We have become more inclusive of minorities, but racial inequality is still with us. Should we, then, lose faith? If we use the utopian standard of full implementation of these lofty principles as our sole criterion, then we would be discouraged. A better position, however, is to realize that we have won many meaningful gains. We need to accept that the exceedingly difficult struggle for justice requires extraordinary collective and individual sacrifices. Most victories are small but nonetheless worthwhile. We need to see these noble principles as facilitating our fight for justice by creating a moral foundation for our cause.

Our task is to formulate policies that enable this nation to adhere to the high principles to which it aspires and that acknowledge both the ethnic diversity of this nation and the need for a common national agenda.