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Resource Paper

Asian Pacific American Senior Executives in the Federal Government

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Abstract

This article calls attention to the lack of workforce diversity in promoting Asian Pacific Americans to the highest career levels in the federal government. It describes the historic difficulties in realizing significant numbers of APAs in the senior ranks of almost all government agencies. Two major reports from the General Accounting Office (GAO) corroborate this view and depict the pessimistic prospects for any significant improvement in the immediate future. It is urged that there be prompt implementation of the recommendations from the GAO, that specific agency plans and actions be established and monitored, that Congress continue to exercise close oversight regarding federal workforce diversity, and that Office of Personnel Management (OPM) collect and disseminate timely, accurate workforce demographics so that all agencies can be held accountable to the American public.

Introduction

Recent studies by the Government Accountability Office (formerly known as the Government Accounting Office—GAO) describe the pervasive and pernicious existence of glass ceilings for Asian Pacific Americans throughout the federal government. While the private sector demonstrates increasing Asian Pacific American diversity at the executive levels, the public sector has not kept pace, and in selected federal agencies senior Asian Pacific American diversity is expected to get worse. Indeed in the next decade, when an unusually high number of retirements are projected across government, Asian Pacific American representation in senior management will likely decline even below current low levels because the feeder pipelines are insufficiently populated with Asian Pacific American candidates for promotion to upper management.

Asian Pacific Americans in Federal Service

Asian Pacific Americans have served the nation with pride, dedication, and loyalty in public service, including the federal government. Today, about 87,000 Asian Pacific Americans serve in the executive branch,[1] 56,000 on active duty in the military, 26,000 in military reserve, and 56,000 in the Postal Service.[2] These figures do not include those in the legislative and judicial branches and national security agencies. These 200,000-plus men and women represent about 4.8 percent of the civilian workforce in the executive branch, 3.9 percent of the active duty military, and 3.0 percent of the reserve respectively.

Despite their participation and contributions, Asian Pacific Americans have largely been absent in top federal leadership and executive positions. The first Asian Pacific American Congressman was Representative Dalip Singh Saund (D-CA), an immigrant from India who served in the House from 1957 to 1963. Hiram Leong Fong (R-HI), an American of Chinese ancestry, was the first Asian Pacific American elected to the Senate in 1959.

It was not until 2000 that an Asian Pacific American held a post in the presidential cabinet when Norman Y. Mineta became the Secretary of Commerce. Secretary Elaine Chao became the first female Asian Pacific American cabinet official in 2001. With the retirement of General Eric Shinseki as Army Chief of Staff in June 2003, there were only two other Asian Pacific Americans above the rank of O-7[3] in the entire U.S. military.

The Senior Executive Service

The President leads the executive branch of the federal government, covering a workforce of over 1.8 million permanent civilian employees and an annual budget of more than $2 trillion. He appoints a Presidential Cabinet and other top officials as part of his administration. Members of the Senior Executive Service (SES) serve as the key links just below the top Presidential appointees and the rest of the federal workforce.

Created by the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978, the SES was designed to be a corps of executives who operate and oversee nearly every government activity in over seventy-five federal agencies. Most of the 6,800 SES members are career bureaucrats; political appointees make up about 10 percent of the total.

According to 2001 statistics reported by the Office of Personnel Management,[4] over 40 percent of the SES members were in the administrative job categories, with about 12 percent each in the legal, engineering, and mathematical and scientific categories. More than 75 percent of the SES members were located in Washington D.C., Maryland, and Virginia. One out of every four SES members was a woman; less than one in seven was a minority member.

About 75 percent of the civilian federal employees are employed under the General Schedule (GS) pay plan, which is divided into fifteen grades. The GS-15 grade level is commonly recognized as the primary pipeline to the career SES with over 80 percent of the promotions to the career SES coming from this level. The Government Accountability Office described SES members as "critical to providing the strategic leadership needed to effectively execute agency missions and ensure accountability to the American people in the administration and operation of federal programs."[5] The career SES members fill a critical void during the transition between administrations, while facing a continuing challenge to balance political agenda and program stability.

The GAO Reports

How well have the Asian Pacific Americans done in the SES? The historical records have been sporadic and not very well understood until the release of two major reports by the GAO in 2001[6] and 2003.[7] The GAO is the audit, evaluation, and investigative arm of Congress—the legislative branch of the U.S. government. Responding to expressed congressional concerns about the diversity of the SES, the first GAO report examined the gender and racial/ethnic diversity in the SES government-wide as well as in selected agencies during the ten-year period from 1990 to 1999. Recognizing that more than half of the career SES members employed on October 1, 2000, will leave service by October 1, 2007, the second GAO report used computer simulations to study how the SES profile may change by the year 2007 according to current appointment and departure trends.

These two GAO reports provided a grim assessment of the past, present, and future state of Asian Pacific Americans in the SES. In particular,

- In 1990, only 51 Asian Pacific Americans, representing 0.8

percent of the total, were members of the career SES. Among the twenty-four CFO (chief financial officer) agencies,[8] eight had no Asian Pacific Americans in the career SES, including five cabinet-level departments.[9]

◆ During the period of 1990-1999, there were almost 5,300 career SES vacancies. Asian Pacific Americans filled eighty-nine such positions, a rate of 1.7 percent. During this ten-year period, seven CFO agencies[10] had 376 career SES opportunities and did not fill one with Asian Pacific Americans.

◆ In 1999, the number of Asian Pacific Americans in the career SES reached 100, or about 1.6 percent of the total. Seven[11] of the 24 CFO agencies had no Asian Pacific Americans in the career SES ranks.

◆ Based on current separation and hiring trends, GAO projects that the number of Asian Pacific Americans in the career SES will increase modestly to 104 by the year 2007, or about 1.7 percent of the total. Compared to the 2000 levels, the slight increase of Asian Pacific American women (from thirty-three to thirty-nine) will be offset by a corresponding decline of Asian Pacific American men (from seventy to sixty-five). According to GAO projections, as many as nine out of twenty-four CFO agencies[12]—one more than in 1990—will have no Asian Pacific Americans in the career SES by the year 2007.

Although Asian Pacific Americans made some progress in the 1990s, GAO anticipates that severe under-representation of Asian Pacific Americans in the career SES will continue in the foreseeable future under the current trends. While this prediction in and of itself is disturbing, the actual problems are in fact more severe than reported because:

◆ Data used by GAO did not cover the national security, intelligence, and law enforcement agencies such as the National Security Agency (NSA), Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), as well as the newly created Department of Homeland Security and special payband plans, where representation of minorities and women in the upper ranks is weak.

◆ More than half of the 2,900 Asian Pacific Americans in the reported GS-15 positions serve as non-supervisory medical personnel under special pay plans in the Department of Veterans Affairs. These positions are not structured to advance into the career SES. Among the remaining GS-15 employees, many are not in supervisory positions, nor are they in occupational job series that would lead them into the senior positions. Therefore, Asian Pacific Americans face a similarly serious underrepresentation problem (well less than 2.7 percent of the total) in the GS-15 positions.

- As the "Federal Government's Human Resource Agency," the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) itself did not have a single Asian Pacific American serving in either its career SES or the GS-15 ranks until 2003.

- To illustrate the pipeline problem, the only Asian Pacific American member of the career SES in the 65,000-employee Social Security Administration is expected to retire soon. There are only eight Asian Pacific Americans in the GS-15 pipeline to fill this or any other upcoming vacancies, and some of them are eligible for retirement.

- As another example of the pipeline problem, in the Department of Agriculture, out of a class of fifty candidates, only three minority applicants (one Asian Pacific American, two Hispanic Americans, and no African Americans) were recently accepted into the Department's SES Candidate Development Program.[13]

According to the GAO, representation of Asian Pacific Americans in the career SES ranks was "more than 50 percent below its percentage in five out of six labor forces"[14] selected by the GAO. It was the most significant disparity among all of the women and racial and ethnic groups studied by the GAO. The sixth labor category was the postal service career executive corps, which only demonstrates that representation of Asian Pacific Americans is similarly poor in the U.S. Postal Service.[15]

The GAO reports show federal departments and agencies with a paucity of Asian Pacific Americans in the career SES now and into the future. While the government has an important opportunity to affect SES diversity, "little will change if current appointment trends continue."[16] In fact, the percentage of all minorities in the SES dropped from 14.4 percent in 2000 to 13.7 percent in 2001.[17] These pipeline and succession issues require immediate and sustained attention by all senior leaders in government.

The Cost of Inadequate Diversity

Equal employment opportunity is not only a matter of law; diversity at all grades and ranks is a sound business practice. In the 1990s, the lack of appreciation and understanding of the Asian Pacific American perspective in the federal government may well have exacerbated the controversy over "foreign" campaign contributions from non-US citizens and the persecution of Dr. Wen Ho Lee. In times of tension or conflict with Asian countries, as in the late 1990s after the allegations of Chinese espionage in the national weapons laboratories, Asian Pacific Americans suffered hostility and profiling because of their race and ancestry. In the aftermath of the September 11 tragedy, there was a marked increase of violence and bigotry against fellow Americans of Sikh and Arab origin. More recently the government's weak case against Captain James Yee, a Muslim chaplain stationed in Guantanamo, Cuba reflects unjust xenophobia directed at even Americans of minority descent in times of national insecurity.

The lack of Asian Pacific American perspective in the federal government nurtures an institutional bias and culture that contributes to the continuing negative image of Asian Pacific Americans as "perpetual foreigners," despite our achievements and dedication to the American society and loyalty to the United States for many generations. The Committee of 100[18] conducted a national opinion poll[s] about American attitudes toward Chinese Americans and Asian Americans in 2001. It was found that 25 percent of the American public holds a very negative attitude toward Chinese Americans and Asian Americans. This can be extremely damaging to our nation if similar views shape or influence the formulation of public policies and decisions. Lack of Asian Pacific American leadership in the intelligence agencies, the law enforcement agencies, and public service in general increases the risk of violating the civil rights of Asian Pacific Americans in the name of "national security." The tragic internment of Japanese Americans during World War II must not be a history to be repeated with other minority Americans, whatever their cultural heritage.

It is perhaps most alarming to observe that OPM, which is expected to "provide government-wide leadership and policy direction in the selection, development and management of diverse, highly-qualified [f]ederal executives,"[20] is among the worst performing agencies in the whole federal government toward inclusion of Asian Pacific Americans. A lead agency with this kind of performance record for at least thirteen years lacks credibility to spearhead the reforms that are critical to promoting diversity in government service.

While numerical representation is very important, minority members of the career SES must also be among the best qualified and the most talented. The few Asian Pacific Americans who are able to join the career SES typically have one or more advanced degrees and extensive experience. Many have also demonstrated that they are exceptional leaders and performers among their peers. There are many more Asian Pacific Americans who are qualified, able, and willing to exercise responsibilities as federal senior executives.

The twenty-first century federal senior executives will certainly be quite different from those of our past and present generations. It is imperative that all federal executives lead an accountable government that serves all the people, values the diversity of its workforce, and produces top performance and results. Many changes being proposed and applied to the SES and the federal workforce are needed and can have profound effects on the future of the government. There will be discussions and debates on a variety of issues such as federal employment, immigration, education and health care that will directly affect Asian Pacific Americans who should have a significant role in this national dialogue and be included and become a constructive and significant part of creating America's future.

Sound decisions can be made only with good data and good analysis. The subcommittee and GAO are to be highly commended for taking the initiative and producing two insightful reports. It should also be noted that there are significant data and information gaps about the federal workforce. Military and civilian data are reported separately; the civilian data are scattered and incomplete. The vacancy and hiring data used by the GAO are public information that is not readily available to the public. In addition, applicant flow data are rarely collected. When they are collected, the results are not reported. Consequently, when under-representation problems are identified, as the GAO has, it is not clear whether they are caused by an agency's failure to conduct outreach or its persistent employment barriers in the application and selection process.

FedScope, an excellent interactive data resource available from the OPM web site, explicitly suppresses the reporting of race and national origin data. As the government's human resource agency, OPM is expected to monitor the diversity of the federal workforce, particularly at senior levels. However, OPM's demographic data have become less available to the public. The most recent demographic profile of the federal SES workforce on the OPM web site dates back to September 30, 2002.

Timely and reliable information is essential for public accountability. Beginning October 1, 2003, The Notification and Federal Employee Antidiscrimination and Retaliation (No FEAR) Act became effective. It is extraordinary legislation passed unanimously by the House and by voice vote in the Senate. No FEAR was prompted in part by testimony before Congress of continued, widespread discrimination and retaliation within the federal government. The law now requires federal agencies to disclose publicly their employment complaint statistics on the Internet and make direct payment for complaint settlements and judgments without dipping into the Judgment Fund. We believe that the same principles underlying the No FEAR Act—public disclosure and accountability—are applicable to workforce diversity issues.

What Needs To Be Done

David Montoya, past President of National Image, Inc. and former Director of Civil Rights at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, once said,

> Advocates of equal employment opportunity have observed that barriers to career advancement are flexible lids. For the groups who are reserved in their interaction styles, their lack of assertiveness is cited as a barrier. For those who are less advanced in formal education, their relatively low level of educational attainment is a barrier. For those who are vocal, they are considered too loud and therefore a liability to their career. For those who are focused in their professional pursuit, they are deemed to be not managerial material and they are left in their 'technical ghetto.' Some are blocked from advancement because they are too specialized; others are kept from upward mobility because they lack technical expertise.

Many analyses have been performed and reports written about the under-representation of women and minorities in the federal workforce. Although some improvements have taken place when there was attention and intervention by Congress and the administration, what has been lacking is the accountability to implement and enforce the recommendations.

The GAO reports confirm that Asian Pacific Americans are severely under-represented at the SES and other senior levels of the federal government and that there are serious concerns about the lack of inclusion of Asian Pacific Americans at the pipeline levels and in succession planning.

The Asian American Government Executive Network (AAGEN)

On October 15, 2003, the House Subcommittee on Civil Service and Agency Organization held an all-day public hearing on the diversity of the SES and the GAO Report, and the No FEAR legislation. The Asian American Government Executives Network (AAGEN) was invited to testify in the hearing and present the Asian Pacific American perspective.

Founded in 1994, AAGEN's mission is to promote, support, and expand Asian Pacific American leadership in federal, state and local governments. It networks with organizations who share common interests. It is a member of the Coalition of Asian Pacific American Federal Employee Organizations and is active among community, civil rights, and professional organizations. We also interact with sister organizations including the National Association of Hispanic Federal Executives, the African American Federal Executives Association, and the Senior Executive Association.Among other activities, AAGEN:

- sponsors events featuring prominent and influential speakers who share their insights and serve as role models;
- educates our community by organizing seminars and publishing informative materials about the government and public service;
- organizes events to share lessons learned, emerging management concepts, and recent workforce trends and patterns; and
- offers help to all federal employees through mentoring, coaching, preparation for career development and enhancement, and information exchange.

In particular, during the creation of the Transportation Security Administration to enhance the nation's homeland security, AAGEN networked with the Asian Pacific American law enforcement organizations and assisted in the efforts to recruit federal security executives and personnel by exchanging information on available opportunities, use of special federal hiring authorities, and the required executive core qualifications for the SES under special pay-band plans.

AAGEN is committed to ensuring that Asian Pacific Americans will have an opportunity to participate in and contribute to the most senior levels of the federal, state, and local governments. Its members are dedicated to serve as mentors and lead in other capacities to pursue greater Asian Pacific American representation in government.

Congress and the administration should be urged to proceed to the next stage of reaching out to Asian Pacific Americans and removing the employment barriers that prevent Asian Pacific Americans from reaching their full potential, offering true equal opportunity to enter the SES and other senior positions, and be included in the current transformation to a twenty-first century government.

In summary, the following four GAO recommendations should be implemented vigorously and quickly:

1. Recruitment directed at all under-represented groups.

2. Inclusion of diversity in workforce and executive succession planning.

3. Monitoring of existing workforce and selection for hiring and promotions.

4. Holding executives accountable for diversity.

In addition, it is proposed that:

5. These recommendations should be linked to specific agency strategic plans and actions, established performance goals, continuous monitoring of results, and consequences of good or poor performance.

6. Congress continues to exercise oversight by directing GAO to perform annual audits and to hold hearings to address progress or the lack of it.

7. OPM and the U.S. Postal Service should be directed to restore the availability of timely, detail, and accurate demographic workforce data to the public, including both employment and applicant pool information.

8. The Subcommittee continues to include AAGEN and the Asian Pacific Americans perspectives in the current transformation of the SES.

The erosion and eventual demise of the stereotype of Asian Pacific Americans as perpetual foreigners will be accelerated when more Asian Pacific Americans are seen in prominent positions of public leadership. The dedicated efforts of organizations such as AAGEN in partnership with similar professional organizations at all levels of government can signal contributions to that progress. Perhaps when Asian Pacific Americans are finally accepted as "real" Americans, we may one day see an Asian Pacific American win election to the highest office in the land and we will be as proud of her as we are of a nation that not only pledges but truly embodies freedom and equal opportunity for all Americans regardless of race, ethnicity or national origin.

Notes

The views in this article are the personal opinions of the authors and do not represent any official position of their employers or the federal government.

1. Not including the U.S. Postal Service.
2. This is an estimate; workforce information about the U.S. Postal Service is not publicly available.
3. Military officers rank from a low of O-1 to a high of O-11. O-7 is the equivalent of a one-star general.
4. Office of Personnel Management: http://www.opm.gov/ses/demograph.html# on January 26, 2004.
5. General Accounting Office, GAO-01-377: March 2001, Senior Executive Service: Diversity Increased in the Past Decade.
6. *Ibid*.
7. General Accounting Office, GAO-03-34: January 2003, Senior Executive Service: Enhanced Agency Efforts Needed to Improve Diversity As the Senior Corps Turns Over.
8. GAO defined CFO departments and agencies to be those covered by the Chief Financial Officer (CFO) Act. These 24 agencies reportedly covered more than 96 percent of the federal civilian employees.
9. They include the cabinet-level departments of Agriculture (USDA), Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Interior, Labor, and Veterans Affairs (VA) and three other agencies—Office of Personnel Management (OPM), Small Business Administration (SBA), and U.S. Agency for International Development (AID).
10. HUD, Labor, State, OPM, AID, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and General Services Administration (GSA).
11. HUD, Labor, State, OPM, AID, SBA, and FEMA.
12. Education, HUD, Interior, Labor, State, OPM, SBA, AID, and FEMA.

AID and FEMA no longer exist due to AID's merger with the Department of State and FEMA's migration to the Department of Homeland Security.

13. USDA added 33 candidates to the class after protests by multiple groups. The total number of Asian Pacific Americans in the class increased to two after the addition.
14. GAO-01-377: page 31, Table 1.
15. Asian Pacific Americans reportedly made up slightly over 2 percent of the nearly 800-member Postal Career Executive Service.
16. GAO-03-34: page 7.
17. Latest available statistics from the OPM web site at http://www.opm.gov/ses/demograph.html, as of October 4, 2003.
18. A national non-partisan organization composed of prominent American citizens of Chinese descent. Additional descriptions available at http://www.committee100.org/.
19. "American Attitudes Toward Chinese Americans and Asian Americans," A Committee of 100 Survey conducted in collaboration with the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and performed by Martilla Communications Group and Yankelovich in February and March 2001.
20. GAO-01-377: page 103.

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