

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Remarks on Signing an Executive Order Increasing Participation of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Federal Programs

October 14, 2009

Well, good afternoon, everybody. Please be seated. Welcome to the White House. I'm glad you could join us today as I proudly sign this Executive order reestablishing the President's Advisory Commission and White House Initiative on Asian American and Pacific Islanders.

Now, when we talk about America's AAPI communities, we're talking about the industry and entrepreneurship of people who've helped build this Nation for centuries: from the early days, as laborers on our railroads and farmers tilling our land, to today, as leaders in every sector of American life, from business to science to academia, law and more.

We're talking about the creative energies of musicians like the singers Penn Masala—we appreciate them—who performed today. And we're talking about the competitive spirit of athletes like Wat Misaka, who played for the New York Knicks back in 1947—the first non-white player in the NBA—and who served in the U.S. Army during World War II. Mr. Misaka is here as well today and—where's Mr. Misaka? There he is. Thank you so much.

We're talking about the public service of leaders like Secretaries Gary Locke and Steven Chu and Eric Shinseki and the folks on stage with me today. And we're talking about the courage and the patriotism and sacrifice of heroes like the members of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team who served in World War II, including Terry Shima. Please give him a big round of applause. Mr. Shima is the executive director of the Japanese American Veterans Association, and we are grateful that he took the time to be here today.

Some of their families had been interned. Some had been interned themselves. But they still insisted on fighting for America and went on to become the most highly decorated unit of their size in history.

And one member of the regiment, Private Jake Kiriara, whose parents were held in a camp here in America while he fought overseas, later said: "Even though this wrong was done to us, there was never any question whether America was my country. If America needed me to help, I'll do it."

So this proud tradition of service continues today in Iraq and Afghanistan and around the world, carried on by folks like Tammy Duckworth, my dear friend who's here today. Tammy is a decorated member of our National Guard, a passionate advocate for our wounded warriors, who is now serving as our Assistant Secretary of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs at the Veterans Affairs Department. I'm proud to have her on board and pleased that she could join us today.

And on a personal note, when I talk about America's AAPI communities, I'm talking about my own family: my sister, Maya; my brother-in-law, Konrad; my beautiful nieces, Suhaila and Savita; the folks I grew up with in Indonesia and in Honolulu, as part of the Hawaiian ohana, or family.

Our AAPI communities have roots that span the globe, but they embody a rich diversity, and a story of striving and success that are uniquely American. But focusing on all of these achievements doesn't tell the whole story and that's part of why we're here. It's tempting, given the strengths of the Asian American/Pacific Islander communities, for us to buy into the myth of the "model minority," and to overlook the very real challenges that certain Asian American/Pacific Islander communities are facing: from health disparities like higher rates of

diabetes and Hepatitis B; to educational disparities that still exist in some communities—high dropout rates, low college enrollment rates; to economic disparities—higher rates of poverty in some communities, and barriers to employment and workplace advancement in others.

Some Asian American and Pacific Islanders, particularly new Americans and refugees, still face language barriers. Others have been victims of unthinkable hate crimes, particularly in the months after September 11th, crimes driven by ignorance and prejudice that are an affront to everything that this Nation stands for.

And then there are the disparities that we don't even know about because our data collection methods still aren't up to par. Too often, Asian American/Pacific Islanders are all lumped into one category, so we don't have accurate numbers reflecting the challenges of each individual community. Smaller communities in particular can get lost, their needs and concerns buried in a spreadsheet.

And that's why I'm signing this Executive order today, reestablishing the advisory commission and White House initiative created by President Clinton 10 years ago. Because when any of our citizens are unable to fulfill their potential due to factors that have nothing to do with their talent, character, or work ethic, then I believe there's a role for our Government to play. Not to guarantee anybody's success or to solve everybody's problems, but to ensure that we're living up to our Nation's ideals; to ensure that we can each pursue our own version of happiness, and that we continue to be a Nation where all things are still possible for all people. That's the impact that our Government can have.

It's the impact of a Small Business Administration that offers loans to Asian American/Pacific Islander entrepreneurs whose small businesses sustain so many communities around the country. It's the impact of a Department of Health and Human Services that funds research on the diseases that disproportionately affect Asian American and Pacific Islander families. It's the impact of a Justice Department that upholds the Voting Rights Act and its promise of language assistance and equal access to the polls. And it's the impact of evidence-based research and data collection and analysis on AAPI communities, so that no one is invisible to their Government.

All of that is the mission of this initiative and commission, to work with 23 agencies and departments across our Government to improve the health, education, and economic status of AAPI communities. The initiative and commission will be housed in the Department of Education, and they'll be cochaired by Secretaries Arne Duncan and Secretary Gary Locke, both of whom devoted their lives to promoting opportunity for all our citizens.

And I think it's fitting that we begin this work in the week leading up to the holiday of Diwali—the festival of lights—when members of some of the world's greatest faiths celebrate the triumph of good over evil.

This coming Saturday, Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, and some Buddhists, here in America and around the world, will celebrate this holiday by lighting diyas, or lamps, which symbolize the victory of light over darkness, and knowledge over ignorance. And while this is a time of rejoicing, it's also a time for reflection, when we remember those who are less fortunate and renew our commitment to reach out to those in need.

While the significance of the holiday for each faith varies, all of them mark it by gathering with family members to pray and decorate the house and enjoy delicious food and sweet treats. And in that spirit of celebration and contemplation, I am happy to light the White House diya, and wish you all a happy Diwali and a *Saal Mubarak*.

[At this point, the White House diya was lit while a Hindu chant was performed.]

Now I'm going to sign this bill—sign this order.

[*The Executive order was signed.*]

All right. There we go.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:46 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Secretary of Commerce Gary F. Locke; Secretary of Energy Steven Chu; Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki; and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. The Hindu chant was performed by Sri Narayanachar Digalakote of the Sri Siva Vishnu Temple in Lanham, MD.

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Names: Chu, Steven; Clinton, William J.; Duckworth, L. Tammy; Duncan, Arne; Kiriara, James K. "Jake"; Locke, Gary F.; Misaka, Wataru; Ng, Konrad; Ng, Savita; Ng, Suhaila; Shima, Terry; Shinseki, Eric K.; Soetoro-Ng, Maya.

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