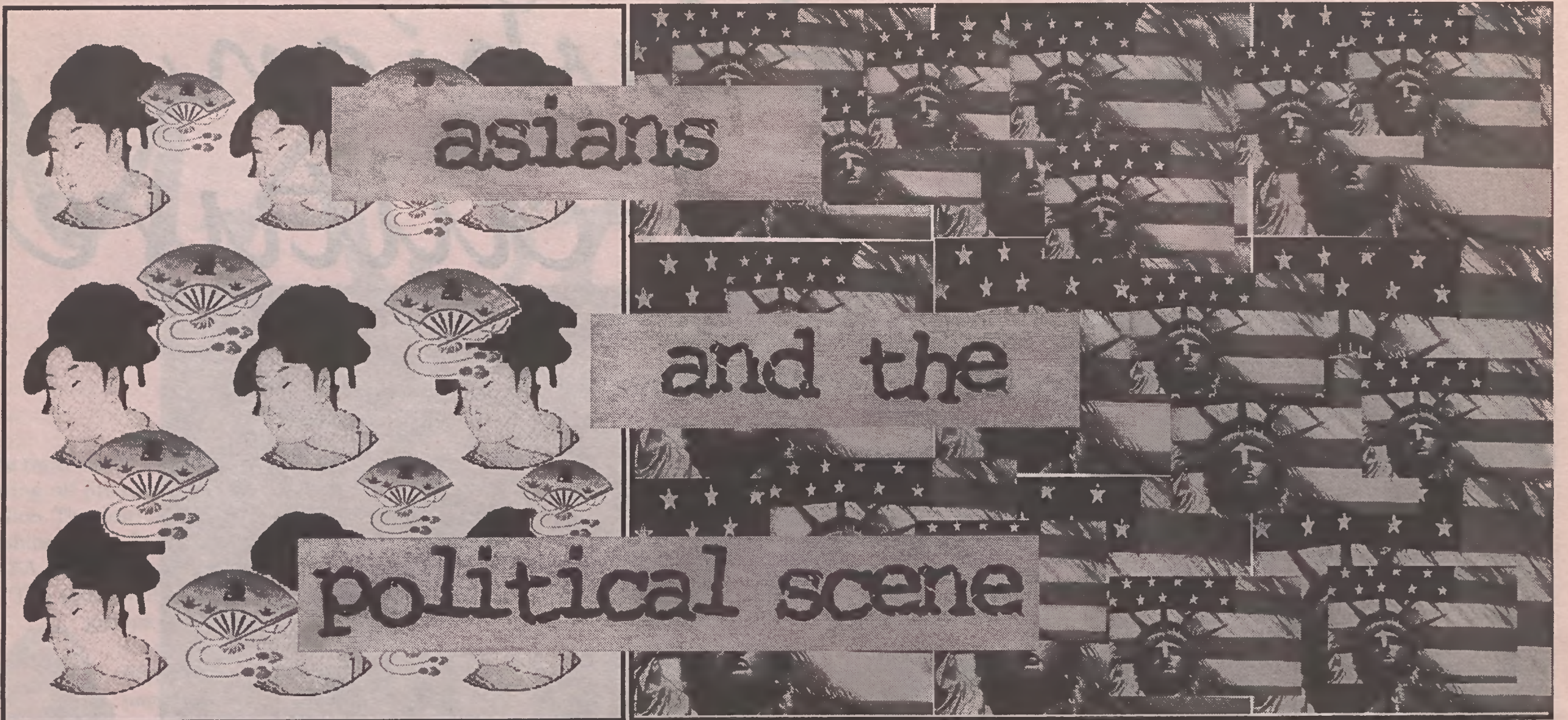


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The Bill Lann Lee Controversy

By Vicky Eckenrode

The possibility of Bill Lann Lee becoming one of the highest ranking Asian Americans in the Clinton administration is still up in the air.

Last summer, President Clinton nominated Lee as Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights at the Justice Department.

While many hoped the nomination would sail the previous Congressional, the nomination hit a roadblock when several Senate Republicans opposed Lee's stance on affirmative action.

A force, spearheaded by Senate Judiciary Committee Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, threatened to kill Lee's nomination in subcommittee — before even receiving a full Senate vote.

The committee vote appeared like an even 9-9 split, with all eight committee Democrats and one Republican — Arlen Specter, R-Penn voting for Lee.

As a defensive tactic, Lee's political supporters decided to table the committee vote until the next legislative session to buy more time and sway more votes.

According to a White House press release, Lee has devoted his career to civil rights law — making him a perfect candidate to head the country's civil rights department.

"For the past twenty-three years, (Lee) has worked with a wide variety of organizations and citizens in order to achieve consensus and obtain

justice for victims of discrimination," the press release stated.

The opposition against Lee's stance on affirmative action was unfounded, said Matthew Finucane, executive director of the AFL-CIO's Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance.

"Bill Lann Lee is a very mainstream civil rights lawyer and he doesn't believe in racial quotas — his record is being distorted in effect as a political football," Finucane said.

"Newt Gingrich and those on the right are often looking for opposition to stir the pot in affirmative action and in Bill Lann Lee they found an opponent because he's a civil rights lawyer that would pursue affirmative action remedies."

Daphne Kwok, executive director of the Organization of Chinese Americans, said the extra time allowed Lee's advocates to build a broader support base.

"We're trying to get as much education about Bill Lee into the community as possible," Kwok said.

The extension also allowed a greater part of the general public to learn about Lee's nomination.

"Inside the beltway it seems like such a pressing issue," said Bob Sakaniwa, Washington representative of the Japanese American Citizens League.

"But the average person on the street doesn't really know about the nomination — this gives us a chance to rally the troops."

Kwok said Lee's nomination has won support from several political officials. "The President has continued to make a commitment to Bill Lann Lee," she said.

Lee also has the backing of members of the Congressional Black and Hispanic Caucuses and Minority Leader, Richard Gephardt.

"The civil right community is totally behind Bill," Kwok said.

"His backing is so wide and at a very broad level, which is very impressive in itself."

Although there is still a danger of Lee's nomination being killed next year, supporters said they remained optimistic about the outcome.

"We believe if the nomination went to a full Senate vote, Lee would get at least 51 percent of the votes," Kwok said.

But, getting Lee's name past the committee vote will still be the main hurdle when the Senate meets again in January.

"The president has said that Bill Lann Lee will be the next person for the position, but in order to make that happen pressure must be put on the Republican senators," Finucane said.

"We must remind these senators that civil rights is a bi-partisan effort."

Where

do

we

stand?

By Vicky Eckenrode

The Asian American community excels in many fields in this country, however in terms of politics they are still working in a baby industry.

The lack of political representation and activism stemmed from the short time many immigrant groups have lived in the United States, said Betsy Kim, special project director of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus Institute.

"I think a lot of it's culture — Asian Americans are likely an immigrant constituency and a fairly new group politically," Kim said. "We should grow in support as we become more part of the American mainstream."

Kim pointed out that many immigrant groups were not as attuned to American politics because of the language barrier.

"Many only read papers in their local tongues, which focus a lot on news in their home country," she said. "There's a lot of concerns facing them and politics is not very

high on their priority list — worrying about assimilating and adjusting to the culture here is."

But, an interest in the political world is growing within the younger generation. Kat Song, spokeswoman for the Conference on Asian Pacific American Leadership, said her organization targeted Asian American students to educate them on APA issues.

"The Asian American political scene in the D.C. area is in its baby state concerning political activism APA organizations," Song said.

Another factor hindering political representation for Asian Americans resulted from an anti-Asian sentiment from the campaign fundraising scandal.

"I think because of the fund raising controversy there's been this climate of anti-Asian sentiment and I wonder if Bill Lann Lee is a victim of that and the negative media portrayal of Asian American," Kim said.

Kim said the CAPACI organization monitored the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee to guard against racial stereotyping.

One such comment made during the hearings came from Sen. Sam Brownback, R-Kansas. "No raise money, no get bonus," Brownback was reported as saying during the July hearings.

Brownback's comment caused outrage among several Asian American groups in Washington.

"We voiced our protest and Brownback apologized," she said.

Despite the discouraging anti-Asian sentiments floating around D.C., Kim said there was still hope a formidable Asian American political representation.

"We're working with other groups to form a national council so the Asian American community will have more of a voice on the national level — we are making strides."