

February 1, 1993 (Vol. 8, no. 11)

Dear Colleague:

America is still a land of opportunity. If a people want something badly enough and work hard to get it, they will succeed. As proof, consider the Asian-Americans and African-Americans. Both groups recognize racial prejudice in mainline (white) society, and both have sought to overcome it. Their strategies and goals differ, however, radically. The Asians assume that the one place where prejudice is likely to be minimal is the Ivory Tower (the great universities) and the field of endeavor most cognizant of objective merit is that of science and technology. Asians therefore flooded the academies, worked hard, and they eventually triumphed: that is, many got advanced degrees, quite a few gained good academic positions, distinguished professorships, and a dozen or so won the ultimate scientific accolade--the Nobel Prize.

Africans, by contrast, sought to challenge mainline society in the political arena, where the passions rule and prejudice can be expected to be maximal. This is a stroke of daring beyond the conception of the more timid Asians. Africans, too, have triumphed in their chosen field of endeavor in the course of time. They have managed to win over white voters and outmaneuver white politicians so that they find themselves the governor of a state in which they are a minority, senators, cabinet secretaries, and administrators of great scientific and academic institutions, including the National Science Foundation itself.

Now, I suggest that the Africans and the Asians switch goals. Africans should now storm the Ivory Tower and take over, in particular, science and technology. They should do so by sheer intellectual panache rather than, say, through affirmative action, for to use the route of affirmative action is to follow a path in which they have already demonstrated competence. Asians, by contrast, should storm the political arena--and in this they should humbly look to African-Americans as mentors. At this time, Asian achievement in the political arena, where true power lies, is pitiful. Consider President Clinton's cabinet. He sought diversity; four cabinet positions are given to African-Americans. It never occurred to him, or anyone else, to include a single Asian-American. Politically, Asians are the "invisible men" (Ralph Ellison). They have a long, long way to go.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if my advice is followed? African-Americans will be over-represented in our most prestigious academic institutions. Asian-Americans, for their part, may actually find a toehold in the inner circles of American political power. Asians are supposed to be good at trade. Is it possible--or am I dreaming--that one day an Asian-American will become the Secretary of Commerce?

Best wishes,

*Yi-Fu*