

Issue Brief: Asian Americans and the First Amendment

Key words

Asian American Movement, First Amendment, Asian American Political Alliance, Third World Liberation Front, International Hotel-San Francisco

Description

This issue brief outlines the Asian American Movement that began in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It highlights major events that questioned American democracy in calling to mind the first amendment, serving to define the Asian American Movement.

Key Points

- The movement evidenced an “Asian American” identity that replaced categorization or identification with country of origin.
- The movement was primarily a youth movement; student activists were the main participants.
- The first Asian American Political Alliance was formed in Berkeley, CA; chapters were quickly created all over the US following Berkeley’s example.
- Third World Liberation Fronts were coalitions of minority students who demanded a curriculum change to include Ethnic Studies through exercising freedom of speech.
- Activism spread from campuses to communities through the establishment of community centers and social groups intending to “Serve the People”.
- The International Hotel evictions were evidence of assembled political protest to relocation-related issues, highlighting use of the first amendment.

Images



The 1968 SFSU student strike

http://images.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://4.bp.blogspot.com/_P7u2bhCxUE/SBteolamVol/AAAAAAATk/a7Vy8ih5oH0/s320/sfsu%2Btwlf%2Bpicket%2B2%2Baapa.jpg&imgrefurl=http://aam1968.blogspot.com/&usg=__h1X8nUyjT4VsmFa7paTj1mpylw4=&h=317&w=320&sz=24&hl=en&start=4&um=1&tbnid=KPtJO_sZjKdWM:&tbnh=117&tbnw=118&prev=/images%3Fq%3Dasian%2Bamerican%2Bmovement%2B1960s%26hl%3Den%26riz%3D1R2GGLL_en%26sa%3DN%26um%3D1



"Police Phalanx." Photographer unknown. AFT, Local 1325 Collection. Labor Archives And Research Center, SFSU. http://news.eltecolote.org/news/view_article.html?article_id=861c46b74409f915f7906399c962667c



Third World Liberation Front
http://www.itsabouttimepp.com/Our_Stories/Chapter3/images/Richard/2_richard_2.gif

Issue Brief

Asian Americans were historically grouped in America according to the country from which they immigrated. Different immigrant groups campaigned for individual civil rights issues, although there were many instances of multi-racial coalitions that joined together for a common cause. But this mindset changed during the 1960s and 1970s through a psychological revolution that produced the concept of “Asian American”. It was then that diverse communities with unique backgrounds began to self-consciously identify and unite as Asian Americans.

It was the commencement of the Asian American Movement that promoted this new identity, activists that contested Asian stereotypes and rejected “oriental” labels. The movement underscored a variety of social demands: putting an end to racism in employment, altering school curriculum to encompass an “ethnic studies”, protesting degrading media prejudices, and combating residential discrimination. The movement exemplifies the exercise of the first amendment on the behalf of Asian Americans, through use of the right to freedom of speech and assembly.

The Asian American Political Alliance marked the first use of the “Asian American” concept in organizational politics, replacing the demeaning “Oriental” term. Fueled by the Free Speech Movement in Berkeley, California (in addition to international inspiration from Third World revolutions and China’s Cultural Revolution) the AAPA was formed. The first AAPA chapter was established in Berkeley and was a source of identity solidification for Asian Americans; chapters were rapidly created throughout the United States as opportunities for political activism.

A prime example of the degree of student activism that proved both revolutionary and successful was the formation of the Third World Liberation Fronts in Berkeley and San Francisco. The TWLFs were coalitions of Black, Chicano, Asian, and Native American students who pooled their resources and political clout to argue for a change in academia. The TWLFs fought for curriculum reforms to allow for a more encompassing and comprehensive education; they argued through freedom of speech for the inclusion of ethnic-communities studies into the curriculum.

Because the majority of activists were students, it follows that the beginning of the Asian American Movement took place on campuses. Shortly after, however, student activism spread throughout neighboring communities and expanded to incorporate a number of larger issues. A number of community centers and social organizations formed with the recurrent theme “Serve the People”. Such organizations were intended to include Asian Americans in America’s democratic ideals and served to expand the participation base and leadership networks of the movement through freedom of assembly. These organizations included the Asian Community Center, Asian Legal Service, Chinese Progressive Association, and more.

Relocation-related issues were a pivotal focus for many communities. An infamous example of such was the 1968 eviction of the International Hotel tenants in San Francisco. Elderly immigrants, mostly aging farm workers of Filipino and Chinese descent, were forcibly removed from their one-room apartments. For almost a decade activists and tenants fought the evictions using their first amendment rights, assembling to rally for affordable housing and the rights of immigrants. But a judicial decision forced the city to issue eviction notices after activists failed to raise money to buy out the Hotel. The night of the evictions spurred an intense

quarrel between the police and the defiant tenants, as windows and doors were smashed in and peace in the Manilatown area was disrupted. Two years after the evictions the International Hotel was demolished, to be replaced by a parking garage project that was never completed.

A new International Hotel was finally built on the lot, a tribute to the activists and tenants who fought for low-income elderly housing and the right to remain in their own community, keeping the memory of the movement alive. The Asian American Movement resulted in the advancement of Asian American power in American politics, as activists used their first amendment rights to deeply question engrained principles of American democracy. Through social protest and the freedom of assembly, the movement unveiled and addressed a number of pressing issues in the political arena.

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