Asian Pacific American Trailblazers in Foreign Policy

BY CORAZON SANDOVAL FOLEY

In May, the State Department joins the nation in celebrating Asian Pacific American Heritage Month. Throughout the country, there are more than 13 million Asian Pacific Americans—a designation commonly used to identify Americans having origins in East Asia, Southeast Asia or the Indian subcontinent. This includes people from China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, Thailand, Vietnam and the Pacific Islands.

To celebrate the month, the Department will host a foreign policy workshop on the future of U.S.-Asia relations on May 24 featuring prominent Asian Americans. Participants include Asia Society President Vishaka Desai, National Security Council White House Asia Director Victor Cha and Smithsonian Institution Asian Pacific American Program Director Franklin Odo. The event will be held in the Dean Acheson Auditorium from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Left: Ambassador Sichan Siv on horseback. Below: The author, left, with late civil rights pioneer Rosa Parks.

Below are some of the stories of Asian Pacific Americans who made significant contributions to U.S. foreign policy.

DEPARTMENT TRAILBLAZERS

Congresswoman Patsy Takemoto Mink was the first Asian Pacific American to serve as an assistant secretary at the Department. From 1977 to 1978, she was the assistant secretary of state for Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs. Her career was a series of firsts: the first woman of color elected to the U.S. Congress, the first Asian American woman to practice law in Hawaii and the first Asian American woman to be elected to the Hawaiian territorial house of representatives. She played a key role in the 1972 passage of Title IX, the federal civil rights legislation that prohibits gender discrimination at educational institutions receiving federal funds. Title IX is credited for greatly increasing scholarship money for female athletes. Soon after her death in 2002, President Bush signed a congressional resolution renaming Title IX "The Patsy Mink Equal Opportunity in Education Act."

Julia Chang Bloch became the first Asian Pacific American to be named a U.S.

Left: The first Asian Pacific American ambassador from the career ranks, William H. Itoh (second from right), with former Deputy Secretary Talbott and members of the Asian Pacific American Federal Foreign Affairs Council in May 1996. Below left: The first Asian Pacific American assistant secretary of State, Congresswoman Patsy Takemoto Mink, with her intern, Melinda Corazon Foley, the author's daughter. Below right: The first Asian Pacific American ambassador, Julia Chang Bloch.

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ambassador. She served in Nepal from 1989 to 1993. She had an extensive career in international affairs and government service, beginning as a Peace Corps volunteer in Malaysia in 1964. At the U.S. Agency for International Development, she was assistant administrator for Asia and the Near East, and assistant administrator for Food for Peace and Voluntary Assistance. She is now president of the U.S.-China Education Trust, a nonprofit organization working in China to promote U.S.-China relations through education.

William H. Itoh was the first Asian Pacific American ambassador to emerge from the career Foreign Service ranks. He served as the U.S. ambassador to Thailand from 1996 to 1999, and received the Department's Charles S. Cobb Award in 1998 for his support of the American business community. He also was awarded an honorary doctorate in economics in 1998 by Khon Kaen University in recognition of his efforts in support of Thailand's recovery during the Asian financial crisis. Ambassador Itoh served as executive secretary of the National Security Council from 1993 to 1995, as well as deputy executive secretary and acting executive secretary of the State Department from 1991 to 1993.

Sichan Siv in 2001 became the first Asian Pacific American with a Southeast Asian heritage to serve as a U.S. ambassador, serving as U.S. representative to the U.N. Economic and Social Council. Ambassador Siv was a delegate to the 57th U.N. Commission on Human Rights. From 1989 to 1993, he served as deputy assistant to the President for Public Liaison and deputy assistant secretary of state for South Asian Affairs. He played a key role in the official declaration by the White House in 1990 of National Asian Pacific American Heritage Month. He was born in Cambodia, but fled to Thailand in 1976 after being imprisoned in forced labor camps and twice marked for death by the Khmer Rouge. He resettled as a refugee in Wallingford, Connecticut.

TRAILBLAZERS IN CONGRESS

Asian Pacific American members of Congress also have made significant contributions to U.S. foreign policy.

U.S. Senator Daniel K. Inouye is known for his distinguished record as a legislative leader, chairman of the Iran-Contra committee and a World War II combat veteran who earned a Medal of Honor.

Senator Daniel Kahikina Akaka is America's first senator of native Hawaiian ancestry and is the only Chinese-American member of the Senate. He is a leader in the Senate on issues dealing with the Freely Associated States and Pacific U.S. territories.

The late Senator Spark Masayuki Matsunaga was a decorated World War II combat veteran. He was also a lifelong peacemaker who helped establish the U.S. Institute of Peace in 1984. ■

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