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# Bamboo Ceilings in the Federal Service

Carson K. Eoyang

## Summary

This article is an update to the 2006 *AAPI Nexus Journal* article about Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) senior executives in the federal government. Despite notable progress in recent years, AAPIs remain underrepresented in the Senior Executive Service (SES). Although recent administration initiatives have been beneficial for increasing diversity in the civil service, budget pressures and workforce constraints still hinder further advancements in executive diversity.

## Introduction

In the 2006 publication of *AAPI Nexus Journal*, the Asian American Government Executives Network (AAGEN) reported on the paucity of AAPIs in the federal government's SES (Wu and Eoyang, 2006). The article noted how, until the release of two major reports by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) in 2001 and 2003, historical records on the presence of AAPIs in SES had been sporadic and not very well understood. The GAO is the audit, evaluation, and investigative arm of the U.S. Congress. Responding to congressional concerns over the lack of diversity of the SES, the first GAO report examined gender and racial/ethnic diversity in the SES in both government-wide and select agency-specific studies during the ten-year period from 1990 to 1999 (GAO, 2001). Recognizing that more than half of the career SES members employed on October 1, 2000, would leave service by October 1, 2007, the second GAO report used computer simulations and the appointment and departure trends at the time to study how the SES profile might change by 2007 (GAO, 2003).

These two GAO reports provided a grim assessment of the past, present, and future state of AAPIs in the SES. In 1990, only fifty-one AAPIs, representing 0.8 percent of the total SES corps

were members. Among the twenty-four chief financial officer (CFO) agencies, eight agencies had no AAPIs in the career SES, including five cabinet-level departments. During the period from 1990 to 1999, there were almost 5,300 career SES vacancies, yet AAPIs filled only eighty-nine (1.7 percent) such positions. During this ten-year period, seven CFO agencies had 376 career SES opportunities, none of which were filled by AAPIs. As the article observed, “The GAO reports confirm that Asian Pacific Americans are severely under-represented at the SES and other senior levels of the Federal Government and that there are serious concerns about the lack of inclusion of Asian Pacific Americans at the pipeline levels and in succession planning” (Wu and Eoyang, 2006, 46). Although significant progress has been made during the last five years, career limitations for AAPIs—popularly referred to as bamboo ceilings—remain pervasive throughout federal service. As of June 2010, AAPIs comprised 3 percent of the SES, although they constituted 5.6 percent of the total career civil service and 3.6 percent of middle-management ranks grades GS13 through GS15 (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2010a, 2010b). As this is the government-wide average, some agencies do have a greater representation of AAPIs in SES positions, but a larger number of agencies fare worse. This compares with African Americans filling

Table 1: Senior Executive Service by Race, Executive Branch, Fiscal Years 1999–2010

	FISCAL YEAR											
	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Native American	77	85	83	88	82	91	94	96	95	95	98	108
<b>Asian or Pacific Islander</b>	<b>127</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>119</b>	<b>130</b>	<b>147</b>	<b>152</b>	<b>156</b>	<b>165</b>	<b>181</b>	<b>187</b>	<b>220</b>	<b>243</b>
Black	602	632	577	592	604	575	587	589	598	632	694	762
Hispanic	203	218	188	218	227	235	249	270	278	283	292	301
White	6,067	6,050	5,901	5,991	5,999	6,014	6,019	6,094	6,310	6,530	6,386	6,477
Unspecified		—	—	—	—	—	—	3	11	9	22	14
All	7,082	7,114	6,874	7,027	7,070	7,067	7,107	7,217	7,473	7,736	7,712	7,905

Source: U. S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM), Fiscal Years 1999–2010. FY2010 and later pulled from the OPM Enterprise Human Resources Integration Statistical Data Mart, and FY2009 and earlier pulled from the OPM Central Personnel Data File.

9.4 percent of the SES while comprising 17.7 percent of the federal workforce and Hispanic Americans filling 3.8 percent of the SES while comprising 8 percent of the federal workforce. AAPIs equaled or exceeded their relevant civilian labor-force representation in twelve of eighteen executive departments (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2010b). Moreover, AAPIs equaled or exceeded their relevant civilian labor-force representation in thirteen of twenty-four independent agencies (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2010b). In 2010, 243 AAPIs were members of the career SES (see Table 1).

### Congressional Testimony

Subsequently, on April 3, 2008, AAGEN testified before a joint hearing in Congress in support of the SES Diversity Assurance Act. At that time, AAGEN stated:

There is a wide disparity in the degree of workforce diversity across the Federal Government with little concrete evidence on why some agencies have consistently been unrepresentative of the nation as a whole, while others have made measured, if only partial progress, during the same time frame. It is important that the executive branch and the Congress understand the various factors that promote and inhibit federal workforce diversity, such as minority recruitment, building talent pipelines, succession planning, management development and most importantly, sustained commitment of agency senior leaders to diversity.

In dynamic, complex, and sometimes turbulent global markets, diversity in the executive ranks of Corporate America is an imperative for economic and financial success. This imperative is even more critical for our government, if we are to serve effectively our increasingly pluralistic society, as well as to compete and collaborate in multiple international environments. For example, our diplomatic and intelligence communities have experienced significant shortfalls in the numbers of their professionals with the necessary linguistic and cultural literacy. These skills are essential to communicating with and influencing our allies, as well as enhancing our understanding of the intentions and actions of our adversaries. Similarly our various law enforcement agencies at all levels and across the country must begin to mirror our nation's diversity, if they are to maintain domestic peace and to equitably enforce our laws within and across our social strata. Unfortunately our diplomatic corps,

the intelligence and the law enforcement communities are far from reaching the diversity levels that their missions require, especially in their senior executive ranks (Eoyang, 2008).

## Diversity Recommendations

As proposed in the 2006 *AAPI Nexus Journal* article, the recommendations made by the GAO in 2003 are even more imperative during these turbulent times (GAO, 2003). Namely, the administration must ensure:

1. Recruitment directed at all underrepresented groups;
2. Inclusion of diversity as a priority in workforce and executive succession plans;
3. Monitoring of existing workforce and selection processes for hiring and promotions; and
4. Holding senior officials and executives accountable for workforce diversity in their respective agencies.

Even more recently, the White House issued a presidential Executive Order establishing a coordinated government-wide initiative to promote diversity and inclusion in the federal workforce. The Executive Order recognizes that,

To realize more fully the goal of utilizing the talents of all segments of society, the Federal Government must continue to challenge itself to enhance its ability to recruit, hire, promote and retain a more diverse workforce. Further, the Federal Government must create a culture that encourages collaboration, flexibility and fairness to enable individuals to participate to their full potential.

Wherever possible, the Federal Government must also seek to consolidate compliance efforts established through related mandates or overlapping statutory mandates, directions from Executive Orders, and regulatory requirements. By this order, I am directing Executive departments and agencies to develop and implement a more comprehensive, strategic focus on diversity and inclusion as a key component of their human resource strategies. This approach should include a continuing effort to identify and adopt best practices, implemented in an integrated manner, to promote diversity and remove barriers to equal employment opportunity, consistent with merit system principles and applicable law (White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2011).

## Challenges to Diversity

Notwithstanding the notable improvements in AAPI diversity at senior levels of government, especially the historic concurrent appointments of Secretary Eric Shinseki at the Department of Veterans Affairs, Secretary Gary Locke at the Department of Commerce, and Secretary Steven Chu at the Department of Energy, now is not the time for complacency. It is imperative that we promote a civil service that accurately reflects the diversity of American society during the twenty-first century. In the face of our nation's economic fragility, the contentious political climate at federal and state levels, and a general public dissatisfaction with the government, it will be particularly challenging to maintain, let alone increase, the commitment to workforce diversity that we have struggled so long to develop. With inevitable cuts in the federal budget and concomitant workforce downsizing, hiring and promotion opportunities will be greatly diminished, which will only reinforce the continuation of remaining bamboo ceilings and hinder efforts to foster greater diversity in the SES.

If we succumb to the exigencies of immediate economic and budgetary pressures and sacrifice the development of growing a diverse workforce necessary for success in our increasingly global environment and growing pluralistic society, we will fail to attract future generations of talented leaders and executives. Future generations with the skill, talent, and passion to lead others will be discouraged from pursuing careers in public agencies that appear exclusive and discriminatory. Without sufficient numbers of diverse SES role models in all agencies, the best and brightest from all sectors of our society will migrate to those employers who place no artificial limitations on how far they may advance. Our nation has finally broken the color barrier on the highest public office in the land; we must not fall short in creating a government that reflects all of America.

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