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Edward J.W. Park

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## Competing Visions: Political Formation of Korean Americans in Los Angeles, 1992-1997<sup>1</sup>

Edward J. W. Park

On April 25, 1997, the Korean Youth and Community Center, the Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates, and the UCLA Asian American Studies Center hosted the first National Korean American Studies Conference to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the Los Angeles Civil Unrest of 1992.<sup>2</sup> In the keynote address, K.W. Lee, one of the pioneers of the Korean American community and a long time civil rights activist who has spent his life's work documenting racial inequality in America, gave an impassioned speech regarding the significance of the Civil Unrest on the Korean American community. With a steady voice that spoke of his utter conviction, K.W. Lee drew parallels between the Civil Unrest and the Japanese American Internment half a century ago. K.W. Lee argued that the Civil Unrest, like the Japanese American Internment, represented a clear case of racial victimization. Moreover, he argued that, like the Japanese American Internment, the Civil Unrest ought to unleash the will to political empowerment for a new generation of Korean Americans who would seek to find redress for the past injustices and to make sure that the same victimization would not occur.

K.W. Lee's claim that Korean Americans were victims of racial injustice and that the Civil Unrest should serve as a political wake-up call to the Korean American community was remarkably similar, in some respects, to the speech given by the arch-conservative Congressman Jay Kim (R-Diamond Bar) two years before.<sup>3</sup> In a forum provided by Radio Korea to commemorate the third anniversary of the Civil Unrest, Jay Kim made a similar impassioned speech regarding its significance. Coming at the heel of one of his greatest political victories—the passage of California's

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EDWARD J.W. PARK is an assistant professor of sociology and Asian American Studies at the University of Southern California.

notorious Proposition 187 that denied undocumented immigrants public education, welfare, and health programs—Jay Kim made comparisons between the Civil Unrest and the Jewish experience in Europe during the 1930s. Jay Kim argued that Korean Americans like the Jews experienced nothing less than an urban pogrom at the hand of those who were driven by racial envy and bent on ethnic vengeance. He then pointed to the Jewish resolve after World War II to politically empower themselves to ensure that their victimization would not happen again.

Given the political and ideological differences between the progressive K.W. Lee and the conservative Jay Kim, it is perhaps ironic that they chose similar analogies for analyzing the significance of the Civil Unrest for the Korean American community. However, in my view, both speakers underscored two key concerns in the political formation of Korean Americans: “Who victimized us?”, and “How do we politically empower ourselves?” The purpose of this article is to describe how the political developments in the Korean American community since 1992 has sought to answer these two fundamental questions. The conflicting ways in which these questions have been answered not only provide critical insights into the political formation of Korean Americans but also shed light on the nature of racial politics, immigrant political incorporation, and Asian American politics.



The Los Angeles Civil Unrest of 1992 marked an important turning point for both U.S. race relations and Korean American political formation. In the same year Andrew Hacker declared that Asian Americans and Latinos were merely “spectators” to U.S. racial politics,<sup>4</sup> the Los Angeles Civil Unrest thrust Asian Americans and Latinos to the center of U.S. racial consciousness and politics. Since 1992, the centrality of Asian Americans and Latinos in U.S. racial politics has only deepened: from California’s Proposition 187 to national welfare reform, Asian Americans and Latinos have become central preoccupations for ambitious politicians and angry voters. While state- and federal-level policies have placed immigrants under legislative attack, inter-minority conflicts between Latinos, Asian Americans, and African Americans have generated racial tensions in many U.S. cities.

As the Los Angeles Civil Unrest has forced U.S. society to confront its multiracial realities, the event has also caused Korean Americans to collectively struggle for political integration and empowerment. Motivated by a sense that the community’s economic damage and human costs resulted from its political exclusion, Korean Americans have begun the difficult process of

institution-building and political activism.<sup>5</sup> While their national political formation has begun to take shape with the founding of some key organizations, their efforts have taken the most concrete shape in Los Angeles.<sup>6</sup>

This article will examine the political formation of Korean Americans in Los Angeles since the Civil Unrest. In their formation, Korean Americans reveal a great deal about the internal organization of their community and the diverse forces that shape the community's political agenda. Even in their initial engagement, Korean Americans in Los Angeles provide important clues and insights to how new groups to U.S. politics will negotiate their inclusion and redefine American politics.

This study is based on the growing literature on the post-Civil Unrest Los Angeles and Korean American politics. Since 1992, academics and journalists alike have taken a renewed interest in Los Angeles, the Korean American community, and the politics of race. This literature is supplemented with forty-five in-depth interviews conducted in the summer of 1996 by the author. The interviewees represent a diverse group of Korean Americans with various political perspectives and social backgrounds. The majority of them were members of political and community organizations that were actively engaged in the political process. Their social backgrounds cut across class and gender lines as well as immigration and generation status. In addition to officers and members of political and social service organizations, interviewees included merchants, workers, students, and religious leaders.

### Civil Unrest and the Transformation of Korean American Politics

The Civil Unrest has had a transformative effect on Korean Americans. Along with unprecedented devastating economic and human loss, the Civil Unrest and the ensuing politics of rebuilding brought the first major political crisis to the Korean American community.<sup>7</sup> As a political crisis, the Civil Unrest has generated two different, but ultimately interrelated, changes in the Korean American community leadership. The first change occurred at the level of political legitimacy of community leadership, brought on by the discourse surrounding the Civil Unrest and, more concretely, the politics of rebuilding. The second change has been the increasing division among the emerging political leadership, and for the first time within the Korean American community, a prominent injection of openly partisan politics. These changes have transformed Korean American politics and have set the stage for future political development.

The political discourse surrounding Korean Americans and their strained relationship with African Americans was a major

contributing factor to the events of April 29, 1992.<sup>8</sup> At the center of this discourse was the utilization of the Soon Ja Du Incident of 1991 as the central metaphor for a decade of Black-Korean tensions in the inner-city.<sup>9</sup> Many observers—from journalists and academics to elected politicians and persons on the street—cited the Soon Ja Du Incident as a major factor that not only led to the Civil Unrest, but, in some cases, justified the inordinate economic loss suffered by Korean Americans.<sup>10</sup> Particularly within the mass media, the Soon Ja Du Incident was invoked in a casual and reckless way, with some outlets replaying the video footage of the actual shooting as they showed the live footage of burning Korean American stores. Indeed, KPFK, the Los Angeles radio affiliate of the Public Broadcasting System and one of the few progressive media outlets in the city, celebrated the looting of Korean American stores as a “pay back.”<sup>11</sup>

From the Korean American perspective, the invoking of the Soon Ja Du Incident and the Black-Korean tension to explain both the cause of Sa-I-Gu and the ethnic pattern of looting was seen as a case of scapegoating Korean Americans.<sup>12</sup> Many Korean Americans felt “re-victimized” by this discourse.<sup>13</sup> A Korean American student at UCLA recalls being told by a number of non-Korean American students, “Korean Americans got what they deserved,” linking the Soon Ja Du Incident with the Civil Unrest. K.W. Lee, a long-time journalist and observer of the Korean American community, argued that “this scapegoating was the real victimization that Korean Americans were made to suffer. We were told in a backhanded way that we were to blame for the riots and that we should rightly bear the burden.”<sup>14</sup>

As frustration and anger within the community grew, the existing political establishment within the community—represented most powerfully by the Korean Federation whose political legitimacy came with its close identification with the South Korean government—could not defend the community. Bound by language barriers and lack of institutional ties, the Korean Federation vented its frustration within the confines of the Korean American media, with little impact on the mainstream discourse. Members of the Korean Federation also charged local African American politicians for turning their backs on the Korean American community even though they had received financial support for their political campaigns from various Korean American organizations, including the Korean Federation. However, their bitter charges only underscored the failure on their part to influence the mainstream political system. A Korean American volunteer at a senior citizen center stated:

I lost all respect I had for the Korean Federation. They have always claimed that they were the leaders of the community, even

calling the President the “Mayor of Koreatown.” But during the riot, our mayor could not even come on the television and tell the rest of America that Korean Americans should not be blamed for the riots and that our suffering is as real as anyone else’s.<sup>15</sup>

While Korean Americans were frustrated and angered by what they perceived to be an effort to blame them for the Civil Unrest, the politics of rebuilding further demonstrated the ineffectiveness of the existing Korean American community political power structure. In the aftermath of the Civil Unrest, Korean Americans had little or no representation in the official rebuilding efforts. In the creation of “Rebuild Los Angeles” (RLA), the sole official response to the Civil Unrest from the city hall, Korean Americans were notably absent from the leadership. Even after RLA’s leadership was diversified with the creation of four co-chairs, the “Asian co-chair” went to Linda Wong, a Chinese American.<sup>16</sup> In addition, as both of the Presidential candidates—George Bush and Bill Clinton—made their tours of Los Angeles in the midst of election year politicking, Korean Americans were notably absent in their entourage as locally elected officials took the spotlight and articulated the rebuilding agenda.<sup>17</sup> The Korean community, confronted with unprecedented crisis, keenly felt their marginality in the politics of rebuilding. A first-generation Executive Director of a community food distribution center recalled:

When these rebuilding efforts were going on, it really showed the shortcomings of the established Korean American leadership right after the riots. We didn’t have anyone who had the ability to work effectively with people outside the Korean American community. I’m a good example. During Sa-I-Gu, I was an assistant minister at one of the largest Korean American churches in Korea-town, and I once served as an officer in Korean Federation. But, even though I lived in the U.S. for 15 years, I can’t speak enough English, let alone speak English with lawyers and government bureaucrats. So, people like us stood by and hoped for new leaders to come in.<sup>18</sup>

Literally overnight on the May 6, 1992 broadcast of ABC’s “Nightline,” the Korean American community found a new leader in Angela Oh.<sup>19</sup> A second-generation Korean American criminal defense lawyer who had been active in liberal circles in Los Angeles politics but an unknown within the Korean American community, Oh finally articulated a Korean American perspective on the Civil Unrest. With enormous poise, she protested the media’s coverage of Korean Americans as dehumanized gun-toting vigilantes and faulted the media for failing to discuss the decades of neglect of the inner-cities that created the conditions for the Civil Unrest. While her appearance on “Nightline” did little to

reshape the discourse on the Civil Unrest, her entry into the debate nonetheless marked an important turning point in Korean American politics: for the first time in the community's short history, a spokesperson emerged whose political ties lay outside of the entrenched community power structure. And, by winning the support of Korean Americans who saw in her an articulate spokesperson who could advocate on the mainstream media on behalf of the community, Oh created a space for others to fill the political vacuum.<sup>20</sup> Oh was quickly joined by other Korean Americans such as Marcia Choo and Ryan Song who spoke for the first time as representatives of the community.

The politics of rebuilding also fueled the rise of a new generation of Korean American leaders. As others have shown, the politics of rebuilding unfolded through new institutions that placed a premium on interracial and interethnic collaboration.<sup>21</sup> RLA, with its four Anglo, Latino, African American, and Asian American co-chairs, reflected racial consolidation as a key strategy from the city hall to facilitate the rebuilding effort. At the same time, the major rebuilding efforts outside of the city hall also placed a premium on racial and ethnic consolidation to exercise greater leverage on mainstream political institutions.<sup>22</sup> New organizations which provided much of the "unofficial" political leadership in the rebuilding effort such as Multicultural Collaborative (MCC—an organization that brought together social service agencies from all major racial groups), Asian Pacific Americans for a New Los Angeles (APANLA), and the Asian Pacific Planning Council (APPCON) demanded interracial and interethnic coalition building for participating in the rebuilding process. Individuals including Bong Hwan Kim (Executive Director of the Korean Youth and Community Center [KYCC]) and Roy Hong (Executive Director of Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates [KIWA]—a progressive labor organization) became key Korean American figures in the rebuilding effort and became new political figures within the Korean American community.<sup>23</sup>

With a benefit of six-year hindsight, it is clear that the shift in the Korean American political leadership has occurred along two dimensions. Most visibly, the shift represents a generational change whereby many of the immigrant-generation leaders stepped aside as second-generation and the so-called 1.5-generation (those who immigrated to the U.S. as young children) emerged as key political leaders. The political ascendancy of Angela Oh, Bong Hwan Kim, Roy Hong, Cindy Choi (co-chair of MCC), and Michelle Park-Steel (Republican activist and a key figure in the Korean American Coalition's Youth Leadership Conference) represents this generational shift within the Korean American political leadership.<sup>24</sup> A concurrent, less visible transi-

tion saw the decline of those whose political base was rooted in “homeland” politics and the rise of others (first-generation included) who had political ties with mainstream political institutions. These included Congressman Jay Kim (R-Diamond Bar) and Tong Soo Chung (a Democrat activist and a Clinton appointee to the Department of Commerce), first-generation Korean Americans who leveraged their careers to unprecedented levels for Korean Americans. As an unequivocal sign of concession to the changing political realities within the Korean American community, Korean Federation changed their main organizational mission from “representing the collective interest of Koreans living in the U.S.” to “supporting the effort of Korean Americans for political representation.”<sup>25</sup>

### Community Divided

While Korean Americans in Los Angeles agree on the necessity to participate in mainstream politics, they have been divided over how to best channel their political resources and energies. At the center of this division lies the explicit partisan politics that have emerged within the community. This partisanship division reflects both the change in the community’s leadership and developments facing the community since the Civil Unrest. New leaders had clear party loyalties. Liberals such as Angela Oh and Bong Hwan Kim were clearly identified with the Democratic Party, while conservatives such as Jay Kim and Michelle Park-Steel brought with them institutional ties to the Republican Party. In this way, a central component of shift in the community’s political leadership was the introduction of explicit partisan politics within the Korean American community.

As Korean Americans embark on their road to political empowerment, Korean American liberals have argued that the community ought to align themselves with the traditional Civil Rights Coalition within the Democratic Party.<sup>26</sup> In particular, they argue that Korean Americans are victims of racial oppression in America who have been excluded from the mainstream economy and from equal protection under the law. At the same time, they also argue that whatever rights and equality Korean Americans currently enjoy have originated largely from the Civil Rights struggles of the African Americans and Latinos, including the passage of Hart-Celler’s Act (1965) which finally removed racial barriers to immigration. From this vantage point of racial oppression and historical linkages with other racial minority groups, Korean American liberals argued that the Civil Unrest of 1992 was a culmination of racial injustice in America where decades of inner-city neglect and racial oppression resulted in the explosion that victimized all communities of color. Liberals



believed that the best hope for Korean Americans in their effort to find lasting political empowerment is to join other communities of color and white liberals who are committed issues of racial equality and justice. In practical terms, this vision of Korean American political incorporation urged the community to join the Democratic Party and its established structure of racial minority incorporation.

This vision of political incorporation emerged within the Korean American community immediately after the Civil Unrest. Angela Oh became one of the first openly liberal political leaders within the community by linking the Civil Unrest with the Republican neglect of the inner-cities and racial inequality on the part of mainstream political institutions, including the criminal justice system.<sup>27</sup> In the massive "Peace Rally" organized by Korean Americans and attended by 30,000 participants on May 11, 1992, placards such as "Justice for Rodney King," "Justice for All People of Color," and "More Jobs for the Inner-City" implicated institutional racism and economic inequality as primary causes of the Civil Unrest. Moreover, these messages reflected a sense of common victimization and destiny that Korean Americans felt with the African American and Latino communities.

A Korean American woman labor activist who participated in the March commented:

There was a definite racial tone to the March. Korean Americans were angry at the white power structure, even more than at those who took part in the looting. The Koreans felt that they paid the cost of a racist justice system and years of inner-city neglect. More than that, they felt that the white power structure sacrificed Koreatown to take the full brunt of people's anger. Only when the looting spread to places like Hollywood or the Westside did Daryl Gates and Pete Wilson send in the troops to quell the looting. Many Koreans marching through the heart of the heavily Latino and African American Koreatown were yelling "Join us! We want racial justice just like you." And, many Latinos and African Americans did just that.<sup>28</sup>

Another Korean American woman who works as a secondary school teacher states, "I thought Korean Americans would use the March to show our anger at the looters and the March would be a display of our narrow nationalism. However, I was completely wrong. The March was really about Koreans reaching out to other groups, especially to African American and Latino communities."

Along with this sense of common victimization, the political protest in the Peace March took on a partisan tone. Among the marchers, a woman held up a large red sign that read "Is This a Kinder, Gentler Nation?" in reference to President Bush's 1988 campaign while another woman held up a sign that read "Wil-

son—"You Were Three Days Too Late" in reference to Governor Wilson's decision to send in the national guard on May 2, three days after much of South Central Los Angeles and Koreatown laid in ruins. For many Korean Americans, the timing of the Civil Unrest, coming after over a decade of Republican control of both the White House and the Governor's Mansion, reflected squarely on Republican leadership and their policies of fiscal austerity and political hostility toward the inner-cities. A middle-age Korean American man who is member of the Board of Directors of KIWA stated:

I was surprised by the political insights of so many Korean Americans. They felt that the American government systematically ignored the plight of poor in the inner-city and abused racial minorities. Especially in the Peace March, there was no difference between what Koreans were saying and what the African Americans and Latinos were saying. "We want justice for Rodney King, we want jobs in the inner-cities, we want racial equality, and we want you to stop abusing our communities." Old-time liberals like us who felt we were a small minority in the community was really quite stunned with what we saw.<sup>29</sup>

Within the Korean American community, the Korean American Democratic Committee (KADC) has become a platform for liberals and progressives to organize their political activities. Founded in 1992, KADC's had difficulties for much of its existence as most visible liberals and progressives channeled their political activities in coalition efforts. Leaders such as Angela Oh and Bong Hwan Kim played key roles in the formation of MCC and APANLA and did not actively provide leadership in Korean American partisan politics.<sup>30</sup> In addition, KIWA, perhaps the most progressive organization in the community, spent most of the intervening years in a bitter fight with the Korean American Relief Fund in a struggle to win Korean American and Latino workers a share of the relief money that flowed into the community after the Civil Unrest.<sup>31</sup> However, with the Presidential campaign in full swing and the prospect of bitter partisan fights over issues of affirmative action in state politics (California's Proposition 209) and immigration and welfare reform in national politics, KADC was revitalized in the summer of 1996 with Angela Oh, Bong Hwan Kim, and K.S. Park (an organizer at KIWA) joining KADC as officers. In its revitalization, KADC launched an ambitious program to politically organize Korean Americans for the 1996 election, including launching a voter-registration drive, compiling a voter's guide (a first time for the community in a non-primary election), and coordinating a voter-education drive through the Korean American ethnic media.

Despite their recent entry into the mainstream Los Angeles politics, Korean American liberals have already impacted Los Angeles coalition politics. Both Angela Oh and Bong Hwan Kim have played an instrumental role in the formation of MCC and APANLA, with Cindy Choi becoming one of the founding co-directors of MCC.<sup>32</sup> As Regalado has pointed out, MCC represents one of the more progressive voices within Los Angeles politics.<sup>33</sup> Through this engagement, Korean Americans have become visible politically with the hiring of K. Connie Kang—a Korean American journalist—by the *Los Angeles Times* and the securing of T.S. Chung to the Department of Commerce. In addition, KIWA has engaged in a number of highly visible labor conflicts where they have worked with predominantly Latino rank-and-file labor unions. With KIWA's alliance, unions such as Justice for Janitors and HERE Local 11 were able to resolve labor conflicts that involved Latino workers and Korean or Korean American employers without having these conflicts grow into racial conflicts, pointing a way to multiracial organizing and cooperation.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Korean Youth and Community Center's cooperation with the Community Coalition for Substance Abuse Prevention and Training (a predominantly African American anti-substance abuse organization headed by Karen Bass) to convert Korean American liquor stores damaged during the Civil Unrest to other types of businesses received a great deal of media coverage for representing a new possibility in Black-Korean relations.<sup>11</sup> In a short period of time, Korean American liberals have brought a new set of issues to the city's political agenda.

While liberals urged Korean Americans to join other communities of color through the Civil Rights Coalition within the Democratic Party, conservative Korean American activists have urged the Korean American community to align itself with the conservative politics of the Republican Party. Whereas liberals cite racial injustice and inner-city neglect as the cause of Civil Unrest, Korean American conservatives have argued that the root of the Civil Unrest can be found in the failure of the liberal welfare state and the Civil Rights Coalition. Moreover, they argued that the Korean American community, with its large segment of small entrepreneurs and accelerating residential sub-urbanization, could best pursue their political interests through the Republican Party that has championed fiscal conservatism and law and order.<sup>36</sup> While appealing to material interests of Korean Americans, they also pointed out the recent changes within the Republican Party itself. More specifically, they cited the rise of racial minorities such as Colin Powell, Ward Connerly (an African American member of the University of California Regents and a key architect of undermining the state's affirmative action programs), Jay Kim,

and Wendy Gramm (a Korean American appointee to the Department of Commerce under Bush and the wife of Senator and Presidential Candidate Phil Gramm) within the Party as evidence that the Party was now inclusive of racial minorities and “legal” immigrants. While Korean American liberals pointed to the Civil Rights Coalition and the Democratic Party for removing past discriminatory policies, Korean American conservatives pointed to the symmetry of the Republican political agenda and the material interests of the Korean American community and the new politics of inclusion within the Republican Party.

If the Peace March represented a high point in the Korean American community’s public display of liberal sentiments, the politics surrounding the rebuilding of the liquor stores showed the barriers between the Korean American community and the Civil Rights Coalition and created an opportunity for conservatives to make their appeal to the Korean American community. Well before the Civil Unrest, liquor stores in the inner-cities were a major source of tension between African American and Korean American communities.<sup>35</sup> African Americans charged that liquor stores saturated inner-city communities and served as magnets for criminal activities ranging from drug dealing to prostitution, while Korean Americans cited their basic right to engage in a legal commercial activity.<sup>36</sup> The Civil Unrest provided an unexpected opportunity to settle this impasse between the two communities when 200 liquor stores were destroyed.<sup>37</sup> The racial dimension to the rebuilding of the liquor stores became apparent when it was found that 175 of the 200 liquor stores were owned by Korean Americans and local African American politicians were seizing this opportunity to severely curtail the number of liquor stores.<sup>38</sup> While local African American politicians saw this as an opportunity to show their accountability to their largely African American and Latino constituency, Korean American conservatives saw this as an opportunity to rally the community toward the Republican Party and reframe the Civil Unrest and its aftermath from a conservative perspective.<sup>39</sup>

Working with white and Latino liberals in the Los Angeles City Council, local African American political leaders, headed by city council members Mark Ridley-Thomas, Rita Walters, and state assembly member Marguerite Archie-Hudson, launched “The Campaign to Rebuild South Central Without Liquor Stores” and successfully imposed a conditional use variance process that would allow the city hall, in consultation with local residents, to impose conditions for rebuilding the liquor stores such as restricting hours of operation and requiring uniformed security guards. The Korean American Grocers Association (KAGRO), representing the Korean American liquor store owners, sought to bypass the

city hall altogether by going directly to the California legislature where they worked with Paul Horcher, then a conservative Republican from East San Gabriel Valley. In consultation with KAGRO and the newly established Korean American Republican Association (KARA), Horcher sponsored AB 1974 in the state legislature that would have removed the conditional variance process in Los Angeles. Ultimately, AB 1974 was defeated in the committee by a coalition of Democrats with strong objection from Republicans. Two years later, only ten of the 175 Korean American-owned liquor stores were back in business.<sup>41</sup>

While Korean American conservatives clearly lost the policy battle, the politics surrounding the liquor stores became a major victory for the newly emergent Korean American conservative activists. First, the liquor store controversy allowed many Korean American conservatives to gain political visibility within the Korean American community for the first time. New figures such as Michelle Park-Steel, whose political ties with the Republican Party ran deep as the wife of Republican Party activist Shawn Steel, and Jerry Yu, who placed his legal career on hold to advocate full-time for KAGRO, represent conservative activists who became highly visible in the Korean American community through the liquor store controversy. Much like their liberal counterparts, they gained their political legitimacy by demonstrating to the community that they could make an impact on mainstream politics and move mainstream political institutions on behalf of the Korean American community. Second, Korean American conservatives were able to use the liquor store controversy to sharpen the political differences between the Korean American and African American communities and undermine the liberal's vision of rallying Korean Americans quickly and easily into the Civil Rights Coalition. In their defeat over the liquor store controversy, Korean American conservatives pulled no punches as they blamed the African American community for depriving Korean Americans of their economic rights. In an editorial published in the *Korea Times*, Michelle Park-Steel and Shawn Steel urged Korean Americans to use the liquor store controversy to "carefully assess who are their friends and who are their enemies" as they charged African American politicians for "unleashing a legislative terror."<sup>42</sup> Jerry Yu linked the issue of liquor store controversy to the more fundamental failing of the Civil Rights Coalition and the Democratic Party. In an interview with *The Korea Times*, he claimed that "these African American politicians" are blaming the Korean Americans for "decades of their own failed policies in the inner-cities that caused the riots in the first place."<sup>43</sup>

A Korean American student whose family store was burned down during the Civil Unrest and remains closed after four

years stated:

My family's American Dream died when the city prevented us from rebuilding our store. We were victimized by the racism of the black community who want us out of South Central. Never mind that we have the right to conduct business and make a living. We are the wrong skin color from their point of view, and we don't belong in their community. However, last time I checked, there were no signs that read "You Are Now Entering the Black Community" at the borders of South Central. If whites did this to Blacks, then this would be a huge incident. But, I guess Black racism against Koreans is okay.<sup>44</sup>

A member of KARA argued that "the liquor store issue really stopped the rise of liberals like Angela Oh and Bong Hwan Kim. The liquor store issue made [Oh and Kim's] claim that Korean Americans must join Blacks and Latinos to fight white racism seem simple and idealistic," pointing out that "it was clear to all Korean Americans that it was the white Republicans who fought for our community and it was the blacks who wanted nothing less than to drive us out."<sup>45</sup> Another KARA member observes that "the liquor store controversy refreshed the memories of Koreans of the real problem of inner-cities—African American and Democratic politicians would rather go after some bogeyman such as white racism or evil Koreans rather than telling people they have to work hard, get off welfare, and rebuild the economy."<sup>46</sup>

While KADC has begun to organize the Korean American community with an explicit partisan label, KARA has become one of the most visible political forces in the Korean American community since the Civil Unrest. Its major political victory came only months after the Civil Unrest with the election of Jay Kim to the House of Representatives in November, 1992. As the very first Korean American to be elected to a federal office, Kim brought immediate legitimacy to KARA and energized Korean American conservatives. In his four years as Congressman, Kim has aggressively pursued his ultra-conservative agenda, refusing to join the Democratic-dominated Asian American Caucus in the House and becoming a co-sponsor of California's politically-charged Proposition 187 that sought to deny government benefits to undocumented immigrants.<sup>47</sup> In 1995, KARA stepped up their activities to the Presidential level when it successfully hosted a fund-raising dinner for Phil Gramm's Presidential campaign and, in 1996, co-hosted Bob Dole's victory speech in California's primaries in Orange County. Finally, Mark Kim, a Korean American Assistant Deputy in the Los Angeles District Attorney's Office and the president of KARA, took a leadership role within the Korean American community in advocating California's Proposition 209 which would preempt affirmative action policies

in state government agencies, including public employment and government contracting. In their entry, Korean American conservatives have joined other conservative racial minorities to bring new legitimacy to the Republican Party's claim for racial inclusion—a central theme in the Republican Party's National Convention in 1996—and brought new complexities to racial politics surrounding affirmative action and immigration reform.<sup>48</sup>

## Conclusion

The Civil Unrest of 1992 marked a fundamental shift in Korean American political formation, resulting in the efforts to find empowerment through a commitment to mainstream political process. New leaders must participate and work in multiracial and multiethnic settings. Korean Americans, however, remain profoundly divided along partisan lines. At the center of this division lies conflicting "racial visions" of where Korean Americans fit into America's racial landscape as well as conflicting assessments over the Civil Rights Coalition. Liberals have argued that Korean Americans are an oppressed racial minority group and their rights and interests can be best protected by joining the Civil Rights Coalition and the Democratic Party. In contrast, conservatives have insisted that Korean Americans have fundamental economic and political differences with key members of the Civil Rights Coalition and that Korean Americans can better meet their interests through the Republican Party and its commitment toward fiscal conservatism, law and order, and the dismantling of the welfare state. The emergence of KADC and KARA has given a well-defined institutional base to the community's partisan politics at the very inception of Korean American political formation. Clearly, it is too early to tell which one of these partisan efforts will succeed in leaving a lasting impact on Korean American political formation. As the Korean American community has become transformed in its search for political empowerment, the inclusion of Korean Americans and other new immigrant groups have posed new challenges for the mainstream political system and its more established participants. As the Democratic Party attempts to revise the traditional Civil Rights Coalition to include Korean Americans, the Republican Party seeks to reinvent itself as an inclusive Party in the face of America's changing demography. As the massive entry of African Americans into the mainstream political system transformed the American political system during the post-World War II era, the entry of Korean Americans into the American political system will lead to yet other transformations.

## Notes

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2. For information of the first National Korean American Studies Conference, see Editor's Note in Elaine H. Kim, "Korean Americans in U.S. Race Relations: Some Considerations." *Amerasia* 23:2 (1997), 69.
3. Jay Kim, "Debate on 'Contract with America'" [Radio Program]. Los Angeles: Radio Korea, December 28, 1994.
4. Andrew Hacker, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* (New York: Scribners, 1992), xii.
5. See Edward J.W. Park, "Our L.A.?: Korean Americans in Los Angeles After the Civil Unrest," in Michael J. Dear, H. Eric Schockman, and Greg Hise, eds., *Rethinking Los Angeles* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1996) and Winnie Park, "Political Mobilization of the Korean American Community" in George O. Totten and H. Eric Schockman, eds., *Community in Crisis: the Korean American Community After the Los Angeles Civil Unrest of April 1992* (Los Angeles: Center for Multiethnic and Transnational Studies, University of Southern California, 1994).
6. National level organizational formation includes North American Korean Association (NAKA), National Korean American Service and Education Consortium (NAKASEC), and Korean American Inter-Agency Council (KAIAC).
7. Representing less than 2 percent of the Los Angeles population, Korean Americans lost 2,300 businesses and sustained \$350 million of the \$785 million dollars in property damage. See Pyong Gap Min, *Caught in the Middle: Korean Communities in New York and Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 1.
8. See Oliver, Melvin L., James H. Johnson, and W.C Farrell, 1993. "Anatomy of a Rebellion" in Robert Gooding-Williams, ed., *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising* (New York: Routledge, 1993) and Morrison, Peter A. and Ira S. Lowry, "A Riot of Color: the Demographic Setting," in Mark Baldassare, ed., *The Los Angeles Riots: Lessons for the Urban Future* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994).
9. This incident involved a Korean American store owner—Soon Ja Du—who shot and killed a thirteen year-old African American girl—Latasha Harlins—in a dispute over a bottle of orange juice. When Superior Court Judge Joyce Karlin fined Du \$500 and sentenced her to probation and 400 hours of community service, Karlin's decision was met with profound dismay and protest from the African American community and inflamed the existing tension between Korean American merchants and African American community activists. See Raphael J. Sonenshein, "The Battle Over Liquor Stores in South Central Los Angeles: The Management of an Interminority Conflict." *Urban Affairs Review* 31:6 (1996), 716.



10. Morrison and Lowry, 34; Oliver, Johnson, Farrell, 121; and Min, 84-86.
11. Min, 91.
12. Sumi K. Cho, "Korean Americans vs. African Americans," in Robert Gooding Williams, editor, *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising* (New York: Routledge, 1993) and K. Connie Kang, "Understanding the Riots—Six Months Later; Touched by Fire," *Los Angeles Times* (November 19, 1992), JJ3.
13. Edward T. Chang "America's First Multiethnic 'Riots,'" in Karin Aguilar-San Juan, editor, *The State of Asian America* (Boston: South End Press, 1994), 114.
14. Personal interview, May 1995.
15. Personal interview, July 1996.
16. James A. Regalado, "Community Coalition-Building," in Mark Baldassare, editor, *The Los Angeles Riots: Lessons for the Urban Future* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 207.
17. K. Connie Kang, "Asian-Americans Seek Role in L.A. Renewal" *Los Angeles Times* (May 29, 1993), B3.
18. Personal interview, June 1996.
19. W. Park, 199.
20. *Ibid*, 200.
21. Regalado, 226-227.
22. E. Park, 163-164.
23. Kang and L. Chavez, "Crossing the Culture Line," *Los Angeles Times Magazine* (August, 28, 1994).
24. E. Park 1996 and Harold Brackman and Steven P. Erie, "Beyond 'Politics by Other Means'?: Empowerment Strategies for Los Angeles' Asian Pacific Community," in Michael Peter Smith and Joe R. Feagin, editors, *The Bubbling Cauldron: Race, Ethnicity, and the Urban Crisis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 286-7.
25. Personal interview, July 1996.
26. See Manning Marable, *Beyond Black and White: Rethinking Race in American Politics and Society* (New York: Verso, 1995) and Raphael Sonenshein "Los Angeles Coalition Politics" in Mark Baldassare, editor, *The Los Angeles Riots: Lessons for the Urban Future* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994).
27. W. Park and Angela E. Oh, "Rebuilding Los Angeles: Why I Did Not Join RLA," *Amerasia Journal* 19:2 (1993).
28. Personal interview, June 1996.
29. Personal interview, July 1996.
30. E. Park, 164.
31. Hoon Lee, "4.29 Displaced Workers Justice Campaign" *KIWA News* 1 (1994).
32. E. Park, 163.
33. Regalado, 226-7.

34. K. Connie Kang, "L.A. Hilton Owner Will Keep Service Workers" *Los Angeles Times* (January 10, 1995).
35. Sonenshien, 1996. See also Kyeyoung Park, "The Morality of a Commodity: A Case Study of 'Rebuilding L.A. without Liquor Stores,'" *Amerasia Journal* 21:3 (1995/1996), 1-24.
36. E. Park, 160-1 and W. Park, 214-6.
37. Min and Sonenshein.
38. Sonenshein, 729.
39. E. Park, 161-2.
40. Sonenshein (1996), 722.
41. K. Connie Kang and Marc Lacey, "Court Rejects Appeal of Rules for Liquor Stores" *Los Angeles Times* (July 15, 1994).
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43. K. Connie Kang, "Store Owners Fight Restrictions on Reopening" *Los Angeles Times* (July 21, 1994).
44. Personal interview, July 1996.
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48. See Dana Y. Takagi, *The Retreat from Race: Asian-American Admissions and Racial Politics* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992) and articles from Bill Ong Hing and Ronald Lee, editors, *Reframing the Immigration Debate* (Los Angeles: LEAP and UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1996).



Marching in the Loyalty Parade. Post members participate in a Loyalty Day parade in Oakland's Chinatown, about 1970. Though mostly World War II veterans in this photo, there is a Vietnam veteran carrying the American flag.