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National Association of Asian American
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National Japanese American Memorial Foundation

February 21, 2012

The Honorable Debbie Wasserman Schultz
Chair, Democratic National Committee
430 South Capitol Street, SE
Washington, DC 20003

Mr. Reince Priebus
Chair, Republican National Committee
310 First Street, SE
Washington, D.C. 20003

Dear Congresswoman Wasserman Schultz and Chairman Priebus:

As a coalition of organizations committed to advancing civic and political participation by Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in the United States (AAPIs), the National Council of Asian Pacific Americans (NCAPA) writes to express our concerns regarding the pervasive use of racism and xenophobia in this year's political campaigns. Electoral tactics promoting harmful depictions of AAPIs and other communities of color deserve no place in American society; yet, they have long existed and continue unabated this election season. The negative effects resulting from such rhetoric impact all Americans, including over 18.5 million AAPIs in America today. Despite comprising a powerful segment of the American electorate¹, community members may be discouraged from meaningfully participating in the elections due to racism and xenophobia permeating political arenas. **We urge both the Democratic and Republican National Committees to adopt appropriate measures to stem the rise in racist and xenophobic rhetoric by candidates and political parties, and to ensure that civility and inclusion return to our national political discourse.**

AAPI communities have experienced a painful and extended history of being treated as "perpetual foreigners" despite being an integral part of this country's fabric for centuries and the fact that United States was founded as a country of immigrants. Unfortunately, these perceptions have also permeated the political realm. During the 2010 and 2012 election seasons, our organizations have documented a steady rise of racist and xenophobic rhetoric by both Democrats and Republicans targeting AAPI communities specifically.² Recent advertisements hearkening fears of China's growing economic power have been utilized to blame AAPIs for the country's economic woes. South Asians, Muslims, Sikhs, and Arabs have been repeatedly portrayed as disloyal and threatening by those running for political office. During past elections, candidates of AAPI descent have also been called racial slurs or accused of being unable to relate to voters because of their ethnic backgrounds. And at times, such stereotypes have served as justification for policies, such as racial and religious profiling, that result in discrimination of AAPI community members.

¹ According to the Census Bureau's 2009 5-year American Community Survey, over 7.4 million AAPIs are eligible and registered to vote and According to Census Bureau figures from November 2010, over 2.1 million Asian Americans eligible to vote but not yet registered.

² For examples of advertisement and rhetoric in elections prior to 2012, see *From Macacas to Turban Toppers: The Rise in Xenophobic and Racist Rhetoric in Political Discourse*, South Asian Americans Leading Together (October 2010), available at <http://saalt.org/attachments/1/From%20Macacas%20to%20Turban%20Toppers%20Report.small.pdf>; and "Political ads left and right stoke fears of big, bad China," Kevin Koehler, Sunlight Foundation (February 14, 2012), available at <http://sunlightfoundation.com/blog/2012/02/14/political-ads-left-and-right-stoke-fears-of-big-bad-china/>.

The impact of racist and xenophobic rhetoric cannot be understated. By playing on racial and religious biases, such statements made by candidates can contribute to a climate that fosters discrimination, and even violence, against community members. For example, our communities have previously experienced the grave consequences of economic scapegoating, as evidenced by the 1982 murder of Vincent Chin, a Chinese American who was killed in Detroit by individuals who declared their anger about manufacturing jobs in the United States being lost to Japan. In addition, community members have been vilified by members of the general public as undesirable immigrants, disloyal outsiders, and suspicious terrorists. Even to this day, hate crimes based on these stereotypes continue. In fact, in the past two weeks alone, a Sikh place of worship was vandalized with racial epithets³ and a Bangladeshi-owned store was defaced by anti-Muslim graffiti.⁴ While these incidents may not have directly resulted from racist and xenophobic rhetoric in the political sphere, it is important for political parties and candidates to recognize that promoting harmful stereotypes can add fuel to existing anti-immigrant sentiment within American society.

Below are selected examples that have emerged during the 2012 election season which our organizations find problematic:

- On February 5, 2012, former Congressman Pete Hoekstra's campaign for U.S. Senate ran an advertisement on Michigan television stations during the Super Bowl. The advertisement featured an Asian woman on a bicycle who pretended to speak in broken English while images of rice fields and Asian music appeared in the background. During the advertisement, the woman stated, in reference to Hoekstra's opponent, "*Debbie spend so much American money. You borrow more and more from us. Your economy get very weak. Ours get very good. We take your jobs. Thank you, Debbie Spenditnow.*"⁵ An associated website featured imagery including the Chinese flag, Chinese lettering, dragons, lanterns, and the "Great Wall of Debt."⁶
- On January 20, 2012, at a townhall in Boiling Springs, South Carolina Presidential candidate and former Senator Rick Santorum told the crowd, "*Where do you think this concept of equality comes from? It doesn't come from Islam. It doesn't come from the East and Eastern religions, where does it come from? It comes from the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, that's where it comes from.*"⁷
- On January 17, 2012, when asked by a town hall attendee whether he would support a Muslim running for President, Presidential candidate Newt Gingrich responded, "*A truly modern person who happened to worship Allah would not be a threat. A person who belonged to any kind of belief in Sharia, any kind of effort to impose that on the rest of us, would be a mortal threat.*" Gingrich continued, "*I think it would depend entirely on whether they would commit in public to give up Sharia.*"⁸
- On January 6, 2012, a video was uploaded onto YouTube calling former Presidential candidate Jon Huntsman a "Manchurian candidate" and "China Jon." Along with footage of him speaking Mandarin, it also included photographs of him with his adopted daughters, Gracie Mei from China while in front of a Chinese flag and Asha Bharati

³ "Sikh temple graffiti vandalism leads to call for hate crime investigation," *The Huffington Post* (February 8, 2012); available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/08/sikh-temple-graffiti-vandalism-hate-crime_n_1263588.html.

⁴ "Anti Muslim graffiti insulting Allah scrawled on Kensington insurance shop," Simone Weichselbaum, *New York Daily News* (February 9, 2012); available at <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/anti-muslim-graffiti-insulting-allah-scrawled-kensington-insurance-shop-article-1.1019434#ixzz1lftYmTrV>.

⁵ Advertisement can be viewed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kxw4uZAezal&feature=player_embedded.

⁶ Website can be viewed at: <http://www.debbiespenditnow.com/#>.

⁷ "Santorum says equality 'doesn't come from Islam' but from 'God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob'," Shushannah Walshe, *ABC News* (January 20, 2012); available at <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2012/01/santorum-says-equality-doesnt-come-from-islam-but-from-god-of-abraham-isaac-and-jacob/>.

⁸ Video of remarks available at http://www.youtube.com/embed/ZVnBN_JTLy4.

from India while wearing a traditional Hindu *tikka* on their foreheads. While it is unclear who created this video, it was available under various YouTube channels, include NHLiberty4Paul, NH4Santorum, NHLiberty4Huntsman, and NHFreedom4Romney.

- On November 22, 2011, during the Republican presidential primary debate hosted by CNN, The Heritage Foundation, and the American Enterprise Institute, Santorum made remarks in support of the discriminatory practice of profiling. When asked by the debate moderator who would be profiled, Santorum responded, "*The folks who are most likely to be committing these crimes. Obviously Muslims would be someone you'd look at, absolutely.*"⁹
- On November 5, 2011, Gary Boisclair, a candidate challenging Representative Keith Ellison, one of two Muslims in Congress, from Minnesota tried to question Ellison's loyalty in a campaign advertisement by pointing out that he had been sworn into office with a Quran.¹⁰ In effect, the advertisement raised doubts about the patriotism of Muslims of various ethnic backgrounds, including those who are AAPI.
- On November 1, 2011, at a campaign event in Shelbyville, Kentucky, gubernatorial candidate and State Senator David Williams made several remarks regarding Governor Steve Beshear's participation in a Hindu groundbreaking ceremony to commemorate the opening of manufacturing plant in Elizabethtown the previous week. Williams remarked, "*He's sitting down there with his legs crossed, participating in Hindu prayers with a dot on his forehead with incense burning around him. I don't know what the man was thinking.*"¹¹ Williams also criticized Beshear, along with Hindus generally, for praying to "*false gods.*" In a follow-up press interview, Williams subsequently stated, "*It's their right to be a Hindu person if they want to. ... As a Christian, I hope their eyes are opened and they receive Jesus Christ as their personal savior, but it's their business what they do.*"¹²
- **On July 22, 2011, Representative Mark Amodei from Nevada ran a campaign advertisement playing to fears of China benefiting from the economic troubles of the United States. Showing a fictional news report from China, an Asian news anchor narrated, "Once upon a time, America became its own worst enemy. When all its borrowed money ran out, they kept spending. Out of control, their President Obama just kept raising the debt limit, and their independence became a new dependence. As their debt grew, our fortune grew. And that's how our great empire rose again."** The advertisement included images of an army with a Chinese flag marching onto the U.S. Capitol.¹³
- **On July 17, 2011, in a television interview with FOX News, former Presidential candidate Herman Cain stated that Americans "have the right" to ban mosques in their communities.**¹⁴

⁹ Video of remarks available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OTOUWc JrD8>.

¹⁰ "Anti-abortion activist challenging Ellison launches anti-Islam ads." Andy Birkey, *The Minnesota Independent* (November 10, 2011); available at <http://minnesotaindependent.com/91187/video-anti-abortion-activist-challenging-ellison-launches-anti-islam-ads>.

¹¹ "Williams blasts Beshear for participating in Hindu ground-blessing ceremony." Jack Brammer, *Kentucky.com* (November 2, 2011); available at <http://www.kentucky.com/2011/11/01/1943049/williams-blasts-beshear-for-participating.html#ixzz1cfxaQMhH>.

¹² "David Williams assails Steve Beshear over participation in Hindu prayer ceremony." Joseph Gerth, *The Courier-Journal* (November 2, 2011); available at <http://www.courier-journal.com/article/20111101/NEWS01/311010046/David-Williams-criticizes-Steve-Beshear-Hindu-ceremony?odyssey=nav%7Chead>.

¹³ Advertisement can be viewed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XFsqk5gg84&feature=player_embedded.

¹⁴ Video of remarks available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YZqyIM1jAMU>.

- On June 13, 2011, while speaking about Muslims in America, Gingrich stated, “[w]e did this in dealing with the Nazis. We did this in dealing with the Communists . . . there are some genuinely bad people who would like to infiltrate our country.”¹⁵
- On June 8, 2011, Cain expressed reluctance to appoint a Muslim if elected President and also stated that Muslims exclusively needed to take a loyalty oath to the United States “because there is a greater dangerous part of the Muslim faith than there is in . . . other religions.”¹⁶

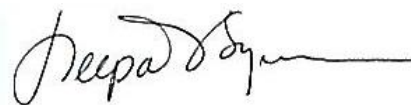
Recommendations

Our organizations bring this issue to your attention with the hope that, as leaders within your political parties, your offices will take appropriate actions to address the rise in racist and xenophobic rhetoric. We call upon your offices, as well as state and local party organizations, elected officials, and candidates, to affirmatively ensure that there is no place for intolerance and xenophobia in political life. In that vein, we recommend the following:

- Political parties should adopt an articulated and publicized policy condemning racism and xenophobia in the political sphere
- Political parties should take immediate public action, at the highest levels, to condemn all racist and xenophobic comments made by candidates
- Political parties should urge candidates using racist and xenophobic rhetoric and advertisements to apologize for and retract the material or statements in question
- Political parties should ensure that, when framing and articulating policy positions, candidates should not alienate or target communities on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or immigration status
- Political parties should incorporate accurate information about the community within programming and trainings offered to candidates
- Political parties should conduct outreach to AAPI communities to adequately understand the emerging needs within the community

In light of the numerous incidents that have already occurred this election cycle, we request the opportunity to meet with each of your offices to discuss our concerns and the recommendations provided. Particularly given the AAPI’s community growth in terms of population and political strength, it is crucial that your offices address this matter in a serious and concerted manner. We reaffirm our call upon political parties to promote an environment that welcomes the inclusion of diverse perspectives and experience rather than fostering divisive hatred and bigotry. We look forward to engaging with your offices further on this important issue and can be reached at deepa@saalt.org or (301) 270-1855.

Sincerely,



Deepa Iyer
Chair, National Council on Asian Pacific Americans

¹⁵ “GOP debate: Newt Gingrich’s comparison of Muslims and Nazis sparks outrage,” Huma Khan and Amy Bingham, *ABC News* (June 14, 2011); available at <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/gop-debate-newt-gingrichs-comparison-muslims-nazis-sparks/story?id=13838355>.

¹⁶ “Herman Cain would require Muslim appointees to take a special loyalty oath,” Scott Keyes, *ThinkProgress* (June 8, 2011); available at <http://thinkprogress.org/politics/2011/06/08/240415/herman-cain-require-muslim-appointees-loyalty-oath/>.

Cc: Congressman Steve Israel
Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, Chair

Congressman Pete Sessions
National Republican Congressional Committee, Chair

Senator Patty Murray
Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, Chair

Senator John Cornyn
National Republican Senatorial Committee, Chair

Secretary Arne Duncan
U.S. Secretary of Education
White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, Co-Chair

Chris Lu
Executive Office of the President, U.S. Cabinet Secretary
White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, Co-Chair

Congresswoman Judy Chu
Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, Chair

Kiran Ahuja
White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, Executive Director

Eddie Lee
White House Office of Public Engagement, Associate Director

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Founded in 1996, the National Council of Asian Pacific Americans (NCAPA) is a coalition of thirty-one organizations that advocate for the interests of Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and other Pacific Islanders on the national level.