

# Lee naming to top Justice job unites Asian-Americans

By Arlana E. Cha  
and Ben Stocking  
Knight-Ridder Newspapers

SAN JOSE, Calif. — Bill Lann Lee's appointment to the nation's top civil rights post was a sweet victory for many Asian-Americans, who had felt wounded by campaign funding probes and feared they would be shut out of national politics.

President Clinton appointed Lee to be "acting" head of civil rights enforcement at the Justice Department on Monday, bypassing strident opposition from Senate Republicans, who had objected to Lee's support for affirmative action.

Lee's nomination united Asian-Americans across political, socioeconomic and cultural lines. It inspired an unprecedented show of solidarity from a diverse community that rarely votes as a monolithic bloc, political analysts say.

The appointment was seen as a crucial test of the president's commitment to the Asian-American community. Would the fundraising scandal, in which the contributions of Asian-American donors came under intense scrutiny, make Clinton gun-shy?

Karen Narasaki, executive director of the Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium, called Lee's appointment part of a "new era" in which Asian-Americans will no longer be seen as foreigners but as active participants in American democracy. She was at the White House Monday when Clinton named Lee.

"We were in the Oval Office and the president and these prominent senators were all talking about how important this Asian-American is to civil rights, talking about our shared concerns," Narasaki said. "I never thought I'd see that in Washington in my lifetime."

While Asian-Americans make up 4 percent of the country's population, very few have been appointed to high-profile government positions.

In Asian-American political circles, the Lee nomination had inspired much talk of *weiji*, the Chinese word for crisis. It is made up of two characters: "danger" and "opportunity."

The danger was that Asian-Americans would pull back from politics if confronted with the double-whammy of the campaign finance scandal and a defeat for Lee. The opportunity



Bill Lann Lee  
Acting appointment.

With Lee's appointment Monday, Asian-American leaders said, opportunity had triumphed.

Asian-American political activists had been feeling increasingly demoralized in the past year as government investigators have looked into the possibility that Asian nationals illegally channeled money to the Democratic National Committee.

One prominent Asian-American, University of California-Berkeley Chancellor Chang-lin Tien, who had been in the running for a Cabinet post fell out of favor simply because he received a letter from a relative of one of the fund-raisers at the center of the investigations.

"Asian-Americans felt that they were unwelcome," said David Lee, executive director of the Chinese American Voters Education Committee. "Clinton has sent a very important message. The welcome mat is again unfurled."

Lee, 48, the son of Chinese immigrants, grew up in Harlem, N.Y. Before his appointment, he served as western regional counsel for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. His supporters praise him as a builder of bridges between ethnic groups.

Lee is the first Asian-American to serve as assistant attorney general for civil rights. In the division's 30-year history, only two minority attorneys

have filled the job — both black. Asian-Americans are sharply divided about the merits of affirmative action. Some argue that the policy makes it more difficult for some Asian-Americans, who on average have high test scores, to gain admission to universities.

Nonetheless, Lee's nomination galvanized Asian-Americans of all backgrounds.

In the weeks leading up to Monday's announcement, Asian-American groups turned up the political pressure. They held rallies in San Francisco and a dozen other major cities, mounted letter-writing campaigns, took out advertisements in support of Lee and besieged the White House with daily calls.

In November, 16 Asian-American groups banded together to form the first national pan-Asian coalition, the National Council of Asian Pacific Americans. They hope it will become to Asians what the NAACP is to blacks and the Anti-Defamation League is to Jewish people. One of the first items on the agenda was to endorse Lee's nomination and brainstorm ways to rally public support.

Gregory Rodriguez, a research fellow at the Pepperdine Institute for Public Policy, said the Asian-American political mobilization over the past several months was unprecedented.

"Lee's success was crucial," he said. "People now know that Asian-Americans will come out as a bloc and defend their interests."

One of the few Asian-Americans to speak publicly against the Lee nomination was Susan Au Allen, a Washington attorney

who testified against him before the Senate Judiciary Committee. Allen maintains that many Asian-Americans oppose Lee's nomination, even though they won't say so publicly.

Allen opposes him because of his support for affirmative action. "He is of Chinese heritage, but the very policies he has advocated and pushed for and litigated for hurt Chinese-Americans," she said.

In the past, Asian-Americans have been loosely organized, partly because they are among the newest immigrants. They hail from dozens of countries and speak almost as many languages and have never had a single issue to rally around.

Asian-Americans don't fit in the "neat political categories that we're used to," said Dana Takagi, an associate professor of sociology at the University of California-Santa Cruz.

"We associate civil rights with blacks. Immigration has been coded as a Latino issue," she said. "But there's confusion about how Asian-Americans should align themselves."

Japanese- and Filipino-Americans tend to vote Democratic, Rodriguez said. Vietnamese emigrants lean Republican. Chinese check the "decline to state" category on their registration cards more than either major party.

Koreans divide almost evenly between the two major parties.

Asian-American voters, Rodriguez said, have sided with Asian candidates of any ethnicity in the belief that they will be more sensitive to their national group than a non-Asian.



## Rate the Top News Stories of 1997

Here's your chance to vote on the top Iowa news stories of 1997. Tell us which stories were the most important and most memorable, by calling **6-CITYLINE** at 363-7000 or 337-7000, category 1010, and enter your **TOP FIVE CHOICES** from the list below. To vote online, go to [www.GazetteOnline.com](http://www.GazetteOnline.com) and look for the link to this survey. Please use the corresponding story number when registering your vote. We'll accept votes through Sunday, December 21.

Please choose from these news stories:

1. A Johnson County grand jury decides not to indict a former police officer who shot to death artist Eric Shaw in 1996. Iowa City settles civil suit out of court for \$1.5 million with victim's family.
2. A freakish October snow storm dumps up to a foot of snow in parts of Iowa, leaving thousands without electricity and millions of dollars in property damage.
3. MCI, which employs 3,000 in Cedar Rapids, becomes part of WorldCom in \$37 billion deal, the biggest merger in U.S. history.
4. A manure spill in July near Saratoga in Howard County kills more than 115,000 fish along an eight-mile stretch of a creek. That and other spills kept the hog confinement controversy boiling in Iowa.
5. The state begins notifying residents of dangerous sex offenders who have completed their sentences and are returning to their communities. The notification produces uproars in Waterloo and Cedar Rapids.
6. A Carlisle woman gives birth to four boys and three girls, the only set of septuplets to ever live in the world.
7. Two Mahaska County men, Jamie McMahan and Chris Kauffman, charged with killing two women in their rural farmhouses, stealing their vehicles and robbing Gibson bank, evade police for 10 days before capture in Florida.
8. Two Cedar Rapids police officers are seriously injured when helicopter crashes in city on shore of Cedar River.
9. Waukon businessman Ronald Sweeney, missing for three weeks, was found near Winnipeg, Canada, in July. Loss of memory unexplained.
10. Jury acquits Travis Jamieson of Monticello in 1993 killing of Cathy Jo Bohlken. Wrongful death suit filed by Bohlken's father, Dean Cox.
11. Ryan Washburn, 16-year-old Cedar Rapids Washington High School junior, shot dead by police after robbing northeast Cedar Rapids bank.
12. State board approves annexation property of 150 landowners to Cedar Rapids and Robins in long battle with Hiawatha.
13. Stephen Keyes of rural Springville sentenced to two life prison terms after being convicted in arson-murder deaths of his wife and son.
14. Construction begins on 100-store Coral Ridge shopping center in Coralville, which will be Iowa's largest mall.
15. Unsolved murders of Eastern Iowa women, Erin Darnell of Shellsburg, Traci Evenson of Cedar Rapids, Julie Bell Davis of Marion and Frances Bloomfield of Iowa City, tax Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation.
16. After months of heated discussion, Cedar Rapids City Council authorizes bow hunt of deer within city limits.
17. Fund drive launched, construction begins on new Xavier Catholic High School in Cedar Rapids, which will combine Regis and LaSalle high schools.
18. University of Iowa Professor Louis Frank confirms his theory that huge ice comets bombard the Earth's atmosphere and helped form its oceans.
19. Kimmi Hardy of Keokuk found guilty of murder and child stealing, ending her bizarre story of a faked pregnancy and purchase of six-week-old baby.
20. Goodman Holding Co. of Houston buys Amana Refrigeration from Raytheon for \$550 million, changes name to Amana Appliances and lays off 90 employees.
21. Work begins on \$45 million National Advanced Driving Simulator on University of Iowa Oakdale campus in Coralville.
22. Dale Todd elected as parks commissioner in Cedar Rapids, becoming the first black city council member in the city's history.
23. Raymond Kelsey of Parkersburg pleads guilty to international crime list that includes murder for hire, money laundering and Colombian drug cartel involvement.
24. University of Iowa wrestling coach Dan Gable, exhausted mentally and physically, says in July he will take the upcoming season off.
25. Gerald Riefflin Jr. of Cedar Rapids convicted of murdering two co-workers at Ralston Foods in early 1995; sentenced to life in prison.

**The Gazette**

Watch for our special report on this survey on Sunday, December 28.

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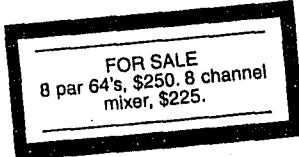
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