

# Ethnocentrism and Racism

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by Ngoc-Thu

I was recently in Washington, D.C. to attend the annual education conference hosted by the U.S. Department of Education. Some colleagues from other states who attended the meeting asked me about the Mr. Nguyen Duc Tan scandal (sending a threatening letter to undocumented immigrants) and what was going on in the Vietnamese community. Most of them wanted to know what we thought of the issue and whether the Vietnamese still supported his candidacy.

One of my colleagues said that he had read an article from the L.A. Times in which one Vietnamese responded when being asked "If he [Mr. Nguyen Duc Tan] did that, it would be an embarrassment for the Vietnamese community" But the interviewee also said that he was going to vote for Nguyen "because he [Nguyen] is a Vietnamese."

## **Ethnocentrism**

Another colleague who has been living and working in Washington, D.C. for many years also told us a story that happened in this area a while ago.

This colleague related to us the story of an African-American mayor in D. C. in the 90's who was arrested and convicted for drugs use. He had to step down in the middle of his term to serve his jail sentence. When he got out of prison, he ran for re-election and won because the majority of African-Americans in the area still believed that having a person of similar racial background to represent them was a better choice. Although this man continued to serve on the Council but the incident created a sharp division between Caucasian and African Americans. Whites berated blacks for choosing someone of their same race regardless of his character. Blacks maintained that no one had their interests at heart but a black person. Although each group had their own reasoning, what eventually took place was the fact that more and more people became distrust in the government and became apathetic to community activities. Those who had the ability to become leaders to serve people went else where to live and seek offices. Families moved out of the area if they could afford to. For many years afterward, the public, social, and educational services in the community seriously eroded. From the condition of the streets to the quality of public school's education in D.C., everything went downhill. It was quite a shame for the place that was the capital of the great nation.

## **Should Vietnamese Elect Vietnamese even if They are not Qualified?**

Hearing stories from my colleagues concerns me greatly because there are still Vietnamese that think "Vietnamese should vote for Vietnamese, regardless!" One positive factor is the fact that our young people are being educated here in the U.S. and perhaps their thinking may change from the older generation who tend to be more ethnocentric.

In working with college and high school students, I learned that a quality education develops in young people the ability to think critically and logically. To these students, representatives and elected members should be people who have the ability, intelligence, and morality to be leaders regardless of race. In one of our discussions on selecting the right candidates to represent us, these students stated the following characteristics they think are most important in leaders:

1. Successful Leaders have courage to maintain their principles even when they go against the interests of some others. Their principles should be based on serving others and achieving shared goals.
2. Servant Leaders put others before themselves. When facing failure, they assume full responsibility. When achieving success, they give all credits to others.
3. Honest Leaders know the impact and consequent of their actions. Before making each decision, they can anticipate the outcomes and are ready to accept any consequences that might occur.

Our young people do not place a person's origin as an important criteria in choosing a candidate to support. Thus, we must act in ways that would not turn our young people away from being involved and engaged in community activism. Being ethnocentrism by voting for someone simply because the person is a Vietnamese goes against the principle and belief of our generation two and three Vietnamese Americans.

Leaders should understand that they are not selected to serve any particular groups or individual. They should think of community as including all the peoples in it and put the community's benefit above everything else, regardless of people's skin color, race, or language. When a candidate runs for election in a district, s/he needs to know his/her responsibility is to serve everybody in the district no matter who they are or where they come from. After winning the election, a representative needs to have a good relationship with all other races in the community because everybody's well being affects the whole district.

### **Proud to Be a Vietnamese?**

Often in hotels where I attended meeting there are Blacks and Latinos working in the food and housekeeping services. This reminds me of the period from 1975-1980 when the first wave of Vietnamese refugees arrived in the U.S., including our family. My mother earned the living by washing dishes in restaurants and my father was a custodian for office buildings. A number of my relatives in New Orleans worked as hotel maids. As new immigrants, they all started at the bottom, toiling in hope that their children and offspring would have a better future. Our advancement from penniless refugees and non-English speaking immigrants to home owners and contributors to the American society built on the struggles and advocacy of courageous people, groups, and organizations that came before us. We did not pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps alone. We cannot forget our refugee/immigrant beginning to place the blame of current social ills on the new immigrants in our community. Immigration problems could be solved with humane policies like in other countries if the government really wants to do so.

The Vietnamese value system bases on the concept of "briet on" or being indebted to others who helped us and "hoa" living in harmony with others. We retain our proud Vietnamese heritage while contributing back to the American society by living in a spirit of cooperation and helping all groups to move forward. One of the Vietnamese community's greatest concerns is to instill in our young people a sense of pride in our heritage root. They will learn to distinguish between heritage pride and ethnocentrism through our actions and reactions. We surely do not want to see our children gradually change their names; replacing Nguyen, Tran, Le with Win, Travis, or Lee in order to not be recognized as a Vietnamese.