

Remarks for ICAS  
August 16, 2014

\*\*\*TEXT AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY\*\*\*

Hello everyone, good evening!

It is wonderful to be here among this distinguished gathering of leaders.

Thank you to the Institute for Corean-American Studies Board of Directors and the Selection Committee, for inviting me to be here tonight to speak and for honoring me with this award.

The mission of organizations like ICAS, who bring together leaders and individuals across a range of topics to engage in dialogue and relationship building, is vitally important.

And with all of the important multilateral issues between the United States and Pacific Rim nations--security issues, economic issues, energy issues, and so much more--a strong foundation is even more important, so thank you again for this opportunity.

Earlier in my tenure as Assistant Secretary at the U.S. Department of the Interior, I had the opportunity to visit Seoul in my official capacity

As you may know, the U.S. Department of the Interior... manages more than 500 million acres or about 1/5 of the land area of the United States, which includes more than 400 units of the national park system, 562 national wildlife refuges, 72 fish hatcheries, 21 national conservation areas and 19 national monuments.

Interior is the largest supplier and manager of water in the 17 western states. Reclamation manages 476 dams and 337 reservoirs that deliver irrigation water to 31 million people and to one out of every five western farmers.

We also manage our nation's government-to-government relationship and trust responsibilities with 566 federally-recognized tribes in 48 states and Alaska and provide services to more than 1.7 million people in Indian Country.

Lastly, Interior manages lands, subsurface rights, and offshore areas that produce approximately 21 percent of the Nation's energy, including 16 percent of natural gas, 23 percent of oil, and 42 percent of coal.

The Interior Department, as its name suggests, is largely focused on issues within our Nation's borders, but we do engage in international issues and dialogues as well, and I oversee the Department's International Affairs Office.

In Seoul, I met with senior government officials to discuss our bilateral and regional cooperation on a host of issues of shared interest, including: sister parks, migratory birds, watershed conservation, and geospatial data.

In addition to my official meetings on behalf of the U.S. government, I attended the Overseas Korean Foundation conference and gave a keynote address to second and third generation Koreans who came from all over the world to meet with one another in the country of our heritage.

Whether in that conference, or in interviews with Korean media, there was a lot of interest in my perspectives as to how I embody both cultures as an American born of Korean parents, now raising a child of my own in the United States.

It became clear that not a lot is known about Korean-Americans, who we are, what we represent. How are we the same? How are we different? How can we utilize those similarities and differences to improve both countries?

This has been a recurring theme here at home in the U.S. as well, whenever I meet with the Korean American or the broader Asian American and Pacific Islander community.

What does it mean to be a product of both cultures?

How does that shape who we are individually and collectively?

What unique opportunities and responsibilities do we have to serve as a cultural bridge between the United States and Korea?

What shared experiences and interests do we have as a community, and how do we give that common perspective a voice in the larger political sphere at home in the U.S. and internationally?

It's a set of interesting questions that we are only just beginning to explore as a community.

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, there are 1.7 million Korean Americans in the United States. But there is still much to learn about who we are and how we see ourselves.

Other communities of color have done a great job organizing themselves around common principles and priorities, and we need to do the same.

One example is the Hispanic Americans community, which boasts a number of organizations that engage in research and advocacy to understand and advance the collective priorities of their community across a variety of sectors.

The National Hispanic Environmental Council works to ensure that have a seat at the national environmental decision-making table.

The Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities led the effort to convince Congress to formally recognize Hispanic Serving Institutions of higher education and to begin targeting federal appropriations to those campuses.

In the organized labor movement, the United Farm Workers has been identified with the Latino community since its founding, and has organized for tremendous advances in workers rights.

The National Council of La Raza works on a variety of civil rights and opportunities for Hispanic Americans; it conducts applied research, policy analysis, and advocacy, providing a Latino perspective in five key areas—assets/investments, civil rights/immigration, education, employment and economic status, and health.

And the National Association of Latino Elected Officials facilitates the full participation of Latinos in the American political process, from citizenship to public service, through programs such as professional development for Latino public officials and political advocacy.

Each of these organizations was founded to address a specific interest of Hispanic Americans in some sector of American society – organized labor, public service, environmental protection, higher education – and each draws upon the best available research and professional expertise to advance their agenda.

The Korean-American community shares these interests: We want the best educational opportunities for our children, opportunities to serve as elected and appointed officials, fair working conditions, clean air and safe neighborhoods.

We, too, can organize to advocate for our community's needs. That is why the work of ICAS, bringing people together, raising the profile of critical issues, is so important. Not to mention your work helping promote the next generation's involvement in the issues going forward, and creating opportunity to strengthen the ties of the community here in the US.

The Korean American community is growing, with second-and third generation Koreans, and it is time that we claim our seat at the table and give voice to our priorities.

My parents immigrated to the United States so that they and their children and grandchildren could live the American dream.

They worked hard, so that my sisters and I could have the opportunity to be successful in whatever fields we chose to pursue academically and professionally.

For me, that meant I could study at great American institutions like Barnard College at Columbia University for my undergraduate degree and Harvard University for my graduate degree.

I was able to take my passion for environmental conservation and community engagement and build a career managing funds for major foundations.

And now I am fortunate to work in the administration of President Barack Obama, appointed by the President to serve at the U.S. Department of the Interior.

In my job with President Obama's administration, I oversee policy, management and budget for the Interior Department.

It's a huge responsibility for overseeing the collection of mineral royalties, the management of a department employing almost 70,000 people, the oversight of programs that protect our lands and waters and meet our nation's energy needs.

Every decision I make, every recommendation I prepare for the Secretary, must be grounded in the best data and analysis. We rely on a team of economists, wildlife biologists, petroleum engineers, budget analysts, and other professionals to collect the data we need to make decisions:

- How should our wilderness areas be managed to ensure they are there for future generations to enjoy?
- How many oil rig inspectors do we need?
- And how many can we afford?

Questions like these don't have easy answers, but it gives me great pride that I can have this chance to give back to this country that has given so much to my family and to me.

In the words of President Obama, "only in America is my story possible". That might be the case for many, if not all of you as well.

President Obama is committed to having the people who serve in his Administration reflect the diversity of America.

I was appointed by President Obama in 2009 and am one of only a handful of high-ranking Korean-Americans to have the great honor to serve in this historic Administration.

But as I look across the ranks of employees in the federal government, and look for the future leaders of this country, I note that Korean-Americans are not well represented.

Members of our community have been very successful in the private sector, but too few of our community have answered the call to serve our country through public service.

Government policies and programs are very important to our community, and one of the best ways to influence them is from within.

The federal government allocates grants for small businesses, sets educational standards, oversees healthcare regulations, and makes critical foreign policy decisions regarding our military.

We should encourage more members of the Korean American and broader Asian American community toward public service.

After all, as the President likes to say, we need a federal government that looks like the American public we serve.

And ours is an important constituency that needs to come together and lift up our voice, to become more self aware of our role in American society, and more empowered to speak to the national dialogue.

Thank you for your time tonight.