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Chronological: Smithsonian Folklife Festival

Senator Daniel K. Inouye Papers

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June 24, 2010

Smithsonian Folklife Festival Speech

It is an honor to be here today at the opening of the Folklife Festival, and to see the fruition of the *Asian Pacific Americans: Local Lives, Global Ties* program, celebrating Asian Pacific American (APA) culture. The 350,000 APAs who live in D.C. represent a microcosm of the cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity that is reflected in the 5 million APAs living in the U.S., as well as in my own diverse State of Hawaii.

When my grandfather and grandmother left Japan in 1899 to work in Hawaii's sugar plantations, they came with the plan of working hard, accumulating a little money, and at the end of the five year contract, sailing back to Fukuoka, Japan to their village. But the realities of plantation life changed that plan, and before long, they found themselves permanently settling in Hawaii.

They realized that despite the backbreaking work, the opportunity structure in Hawaii offered a better life for their son, my father, who was educated in Hawaii's schools. And many years later, I was born and educated in Hawaii's public schools, and a number of profound events unfolded and impacted my life and perspective as a Japanese American.

On December 7, 1941, when I was a high school senior, Japanese naval bombers attacked Pearl Harbor and three airbases on the island of Oahu. This was the beginning of the Pacific War. On February 19, 1942, Executive Order 9066 was issued, authorizing the U.S. Army to establish internment centers in seven states to incarcerate approximately 120,000 men, women, and children of Japanese ancestry.

Most of those sent to camps were American citizens. They were not charged with violations of any law. They were not accused or convicted of espionage. They were not traitors or criminals. Their only "crime" was that they were Japanese. Then, the U.S. on March 17, 1942, classified Japanese Americans as "enemy aliens." In the eyes of my country and my government, my friends and I were "enemy aliens."

For many of us this was a painful insult, because we considered ourselves to be Americans to the core, and we petitioned Washington to give us the opportunity to put on the uniform. Due to the overwhelming numbers of petitioners, President Roosevelt announced the formation of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, and I enlisted in the U.S. Army in March of 1943.

While serving in the Army, I met many brave young Japanese Americans who were unjustly interned, and to prove their loyalty, they volunteered to join the U.S. military from camp. Many died in defense of our nation's principles of justice and democracy while their families were stripped of their civil rights.

I am immensely proud of my comrades who gave their lives "proving" their loyalty to this country. I was resolved, from the day that I was discharged from the military, to remedy the injustice suffered by 120,000 interned Japanese Americans.

My colleagues in Congress and in the Asian Pacific American community coalesced and toiled until August 10, 1989, when the Civil Liberties Act became law, and reparations were later made in recognition of those injustices. This Act demonstrates to me that America, like all nations, is capable of committing wrongful acts, but more importantly, America can also rise to great heights of goodness and glory.

I am proud that I am citizen of a country that has the strength and humility to apologize for its past wrongs, and work together, strengthened and unified in a multicultural community, towards a greater democracy.

I still remember my father's words when I left home to serve in the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. He told me, "America has been very good to the Inouye family. We have a debt to pay. If you are called upon to give your life to defend this country, do so with honor. Do not dishonor your family and do not dishonor your country." I never forgot his words.

I am extremely proud to be an American. I am extremely proud to be a Japanese American. And I am honored to be here today at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, whose program showcases the complex and fluid nature of being an Asian Pacific American. I look forward to enjoying the dynamic displays of theater, music and dance performed by the APA community.

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