

Speeches and messages: 1963-1964: Senate floor speech by Senator Daniel K. Inouye

Senator Daniel K. Inouye Papers

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SENATE FLOOR SPEECH BY SENATOR DANIEL K. INOUE

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Mr. President,

The greatest wrong our nation has ever perpetrated, in a history perhaps unmatched for honor and generosity towards mankind, is one we have inflicted on a part of our own people.

Since the days when the settlers first came to this new and wild land, Americans have been consumed with an idea that departed entirely from the thought and custom of all previous history. This idea involved a new way of looking at the character of man.

Our government, also for the first time in history, was built on this principle. As Abraham Lincoln once said:

"Most governments have been based, practically, on the denial of the equal rights of men. Ours began by affirming those rights. They said 'some men are too ignorant and vicious to share in government.' 'Possibly so,' said we, 'and by your system you would always keep them ignorant and vicious. We propose to give all a chance; and we expect the weak to grow stronger, the ignorant wiser and all better and happier together'."

Yet here in the first country of the world which was dedicated to this idea, in the country which has been responsible for keeping it alive in times of darkness ever since, and is responsible today, we have not worked or cared to see it scrupulously applied among our own people.

We have given reasons, some of us, and others have closed their eyes and turned their backs upon laws, practices and attitudes which we should long ago have fought to have abolished. It has never been easy for men to forgive others for being different from themselves, whether in some superficial feature like shape or color or even in less noticeable differences, such as the minor tenets of one's religion. Laws cannot change the hearts of men, and we will not change the hearts of men by this law if indeed we are able to enact it.

Some have said to me, the Negroes have not earned full citizenship; they have not shown they will take the responsibility to be good citizens. I answer that it is hard enough just to earn a living without education, without

justice in the protection of the laws, without self-respect or hope for improvement, and with hate and repugnance their all too constant welcome.

What effect would these surroundings have on any man? I do not know but I believe the Negro people have, on the whole, returned our two plus centuries of injustice with almost miraculous forgiveness and restraint.

To change these living habits of so long a time does not come easy, and we must do all within our power to see that the change is as little disruptive, and as little painful as it can possibly be. This will require still more restraint on the part of those who have already waited so long. But change we must, and this requires restraint on the part of those who must endure the change. This remark is not directed at the South, for what section of the country can say that it has held out its hand and heart to the Negroes in every area of human activity and in the way that must be done if they are ever to become truly members of the community.

I feel, however, that this attitude is changing. Many factors lead me to believe so, from the inspirational march in Washington last summer to the new desire for tolerance on the part of all Americans since the death of our martyred President. Injustice is, after all, alien to our natures, and its existence has exacted a price from the consciences of those who have allowed it to go on as well from those who have suffered under it. The treatment of the Negroes and other minority peoples in our country has been, as the poet Archibald MacLeish once said:

"... antithesis of America -- the passionate repudiation of the American proposition, and thus the implicit rejection of America itself. . .

"If the American proposition is no longer the proposition to which the American heart and mind were committed at our beginning, then America is finished and the only question left is when she will fall. "

I do not believe America will fall now or in the future, and I further believe this one great infirmity, this inconsistency in our national character and in our view of ourselves will in time be healed.

Although new law is not the only solution, it is part of the solution and it is the part that we, the lawmakers, are responsible to provide. The rest must be provided in the churches, in the schools and in the consciences

of the people. And as this long debate begins let us consider that there are no special privileges being sought here. This bill attempts to give by law what should have been, but has not been provided by practice -- an even chance. A chance to go to school and vote and hold a job, simple things which the rest of us have enjoyed without a moment's thought. It is time for all Americans to be included in the American dream.

Justice Holmes once said that a desire for the superlative seemed to him to be "at the bottom of the philosopher's effort to prove that truth is absolute" and that those who believed in natural law made the mistake of accepting what was familiar as being something which must be accepted by all men everywhere.

I do not know whether such a thing as Justice exists outside of the mind of man. But I am impressed by the fact that through the centuries the overwhelming number of men have longed for it, have recognized its absence or presence without being told, have fought for it, and have sacrificed their lives to attain it for their posterity.

Whether it exists in the mind of man only or whether Justice is in fact a Being of its Own, its attraction seems irresistible.

Each man knows in his own heart what he believes Justice to be. Let us each follow this inner dictate in the debate we have begun.