

# Speech- Asian/Pacific American Heritage Week

Senator Daniel K. Akaka Papers

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Honorable Daniel K. Akaka  
Speech--Asian/Pacific American Heritage Week  
General Services Administration  
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Aloha. It is indeed a pleasure for me to be with you this morning to share in this week-long celebration highlighting Asian/Pacific American Heritage week.

I can think of no greater justification of the goals of this week's theme than the words of President Franklin Roosevelt who once said: "Remember, always, that all of us are descended from immigrants."

At some point in its history, every group of people has been forced to leave its homeland and to move on in search of a better life. Some have fled from political oppression, while others have gone in search of a better standard of living. But all immigrants have left their homelands in search of freedom and a desire for new opportunity.

It was William McKinley, our Nation's 25th President, who once said: "The mission of the United States is one of benevolent assimilation." And yet, there have been times in our Nation's history when our good intentions have succumbed to the pressures of world and national events. We have not always made it easy for immigrants from Europe and other parts of the world. We have not always made it easy for Asian peoples to assimilate into this great nation of nations.

In 1850, the gold of California beckoned the world's poor. In fact, the immigration of Asians to the western

world was largely the result of poverty and misery in their homelands in the nineteenth century. Twenty thousand Chinese came to California in 1852, and most of them were headed for the goldfields. The winter of 1852 saw a rash of beatings, murders and robberies of Chinese simply because they wanted to mine alongside the caucasians. And yet for the next ten years, the Chinese continued to mine, in the face of such adversity. Their dream of a better life gave them courage.

World War II brought a different set of problems to Asian-Americans. Thousands of Japanese-Americans were placed in relocation camps in the course of those wartime years. It wasn't until 1943 that the Secretary of War, Henry Stimson, announced that he was planning the organization of a new military unit . . . a special combat team of Nisei. From Hawaii, 7,500 Nisei volunteered for the special unit, although the Hawaii quota was supposed to be only 1,500. From the west coast and other regions of our nation, men volunteered for that special unit. And that special unit, the 442nd Combat Team, became the most decorated unit in the United States Army. The 442nd was known throughout the Nation for the bravery and ability of its men. They won more than a thousand medals and citations, and, more importantly, the respect of every American citizen for their loyalty and courage. The motto

of the 442nd was "Go for Broke," and . . . they did. The  
casualty rate of that unit was 308 percent.

When the 442nd finally came home in 1946, it marched  
down Constitution Avenue in the Nation's Capital, and  
President Truman himself gave the unit its Distinguished  
Unit Citation.

By the Spring of 1946, all relocation camps were  
closed. By 1952, the restrictive laws against  
naturalization of persons born in Japan were removed.

Since that time, our Nation has come a long way in  
making sure that no minority group in this country faces  
discrimination. To date, some 500 laws that discriminated  
against Asian-Americans have been repealed. My good friend  
and colleague, Congressman Norman Mineta, continues to lead  
the fight in the House against Asian-American discrimina-  
tion. During the 96th Congress, Congressman Mineta  
introduced a bill that created a study commission to  
determine if some 120,000 Japanese-Americans placed in  
relocation camps are entitled to official redress for their  
losses. The study commission reported its findings to  
Congress in February of this year. The report points out  
that "not a single documented act of espionage, sabotage or  
fifth column activity was committed by an American of  
Japanese ancestry or by a resident Japanese alien on the

West Coast." It further concludes that the promulgation of Executive Order 9066 was not justified by military necessity and that the decisions which followed from this order were not driven by analysis of military conditions. After months

of study, the commission concluded:

"The broad historical causes which shaped these decisions were race prejudice, war hysteria and a failure of political leadership. A grave injustice was done to those American citizens and resident aliens of Japanese ancestry, who without individual review or any probative evidence against them, were excluded, removed and detained by the United States during World War II."

As many of you many know, witnesses before the commission were split over the feasibility of individual reparations. The commission, therefore, has decided to include any proposals in a later report. In my own view, I strongly support offering new opportunity to those whose families were affected by this form of war hysteria, for opportunity is precisely what we took away from our Japanese-American citizens. I, therefore, lend my full support to the creation of scholarship funds for the families of all who were affected by the promulgation of Executive Order

9066. An ~~even more~~ important way to make amends would be to set forth principles against a recurrence of the tragedy.

~~These~~<sup>This</sup> could and should hold the Nation to an ideal for which many Americans thought they fought in World War II: that the rights of citizenship in this country in no way depend on race or ancestry.

Certainly, it is clear to me that we cannot do enough to heal the damage we did to Asian-Americans in World War II.

In America today, there are more than four million Americans of Asian and Pacific ancestry; more than 580,000 of our Asian/Pacific Americans live in Hawaii. [ And all of

them live in harmony.

I consider Hawaii to be a living experiment, for Hawaii is a microcosm in which all minority groups are represented. It can honestly be said that there is no majority in Hawaii . . . everyone is a member of the minority.

In Hawaii . . . all groups, whether they be Filipino, Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Native Hawaiian or Caucasian have all become assimilated into the "Hawaii" way of living. And, at the same time, each group has managed to keep its traditions and culture intact. Each group has greatly enhanced our cultural heritage and institutions. It may seem to be a paradox, but this cultural diversity is actually a cohesive force between the groups.

When I think about the ethnic diversity in Hawaii, and the success it has had, I am always reminded of something

Honorable Daniel K. Akaka  
Speech--Asian/Pacific American Heritage Week  
Page Six

that Andrew Lind, a <sup>Hawaii</sup> sociologist, once said of our people:  
"The peoples of Hawaii are becoming Hawaii's people."

As each ethnic group came to Hawaii, they faced many difficulties. Some were merely the result of human nature. Others were environmental. But all of these immigrants worked hard. And, on the merit of their work they were accepted in their society and rose to responsible positions in our community.

Our local government is, perhaps, the best example of this phenomenon. For example, our Governor is of Japanese ancestry. The former Mayor of the City of Honolulu was Italian. The present Honolulu Mayor is a Caucasian woman. The Mayor of Maui is Portuguese. The Big Island Mayor is Japanese, and the Mayor of Kauai <sup>was</sup> ~~is~~ Filipino. These men were elected on the basis of their merit . . . and not because they were members of minority groups.

Hawaii is unique among states in this respect. As a Nation, we would be wise, perhaps, to imitate the Aloha State's awareness of the need to understand our most recent immigrants . . . the Vietnamese "boat people" as well as other groups.

A recent trip that I took along with other members of the Congress explored just how critical <sup>of the Vietnamese immigrants</sup> this problem <sup>may</sup> become. As a delegation, we were appointed by House Speaker

O'Neill to undertake a fact-finding mission concerning Indochinese refugees in Southeast Asia. The purpose of this mission was to review conditions in refugee camps in four Nations and to report our recommendations and findings to the House of Representatives, in the event that we felt legislative action was necessary. In all, the delegation visited Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, Hong Kong, Bangkok and Hanoi.

I think that the most important recommendation to come out of this fact-finding mission is that the international community as a whole has an obligation to participate in the resettling of Indochinese refugees. Many of the people I met in the refugee camps told me that they already had family living in this country and wished to join them.

As you know, the United States has generously carried the heaviest burden in the resettlement program. In Hawaii, we have taken in the largest percentage of refugees in relation to the total population of the State. These refugees in Hawaii have been fortunate. Already they are quickly becoming Hawaii's people.

But, I question whether or not the refugees on the mainland fare as well. There have been reports of incidents . . . of clashes between cultures and between some Americans and the newly arrived refugees. This is, I believe, the result of distorted communications between the two cultures.

It is often said that "meanings are in people." This is especially true when language or culture acts as a barrier. These barriers will be broken down on both sides, but it will take increased cooperation and compromise between the groups. Although Hawaii is not perfect in this area, it is certainly the best example of multi-ethnic harmony I know of.

As Americans, right now we find ourselves confronted by a crucial question. Will we open our arms to these peoples? Will we welcome them into our country as our ancestors welcomed others? Perhaps the rest of the country will see Hawaii as a paradigm for a society where many races live in harmony. Perhaps the rest of the country can benefit from what we in Hawaii have learned . . . that, given a chance, these refugees will work hard and some of them will become leaders in our society.

As a Nation, we face the responsibility to motivate all of our citizens to a greater understanding of other groups, and to call loudly for a humanitarian solution to the plight of these ~~most recent~~ refugees we have welcomed. They will add to the beauty, strength and hope of our great country. ★

After all, America's strength lies in the heart of its people. Let us, then, open our hearts to the immigrants who seek freedom . . . for their sakes, and for the sake of the greatness of our country. As we celebrate our 5th annual

Honorable Daniel K. Akaka  
Speech-Asian/Pacific American Heritage Week  
Page Nine

Asian/Pacific Heritage week, now is the time to make certain  
that we honor that commitment.

Thank you.