

Address of Senator Daniel K. Akaka to the organization of Chinese Americans 1998 national convention

Senator Daniel K. Akaka Papers

Public relations, Speeches, statements, and messages, Box PR19, Folder 64

<https://hdl.handle.net/10524/79026>

Items in eVols are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved, unless otherwise indicated.

UHM Library Digital Collections Disclaimer and Copyright Information

**ADDRESS OF U.S. SENATOR DANIEL K. AKAKA
TO THE ORGANIZATION OF CHINESE AMERICANS
1998 NATIONAL CONVENTION
EMPIRE ROOM, OMNI SHOREHAM HOTEL
WASHINGTON, D.C.
JULY 18, 1998, 7:30-9:00 A.M.**

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. As we say in Hawaii, mahalo nui loa--thank you very much--for your welcome and the invitation to address your 1998 National Convention. Congratulations are in order as the Organization of Chinese Americans celebrates its 25th anniversary.

For a quarter century, OCA has worked to increase Chinese American and Asian Pacific American participation and leadership in public policy and government. Through civil rights advocacy, education scholarships, career and business programs, leadership training seminars, and a variety of other outstanding programs, OCA provides a national voice for Americans of Chinese and Asian descent. In Congress, you are recognized as an important and effective advocate for the Asian American community.

I am proud to be a friend and supporter of OCA's Hawaii chapter. Our Hawaii membership reflects the spirit of diversity and harmony our multi-ethnic state is famous for, and also speaks to the importance of OCA's mission to Asian Americans, indeed, to all Americans.

The Hawaii chapter's past president is my friend and accountant, Pat Fujieki. He is a Japanese American married to a woman of Chinese ancestry. As chapter president, he was an effective voice on the welfare and immigration issues which Congress considered in 1996.

A Japanese American serving as president of a Chinese American organization is par for the course in Hawaii, where every race and ethnic group is a minority. This ethnic and racial diversity makes my state a unique and special place. Our citizens preserve and perpetuate their heritage and culture, while they learn about, enjoy, and respect other ethnic traditions. And together we work to build our communities, proud to be citizens of Hawaii and the United States.

Absent a single racial majority in Hawaii, dialogue, compromise, and coalition-building are essential elements to successful leadership in business and politics.

President Clinton makes it a point to cite our experience in Hawaii in speeches around the country as part of the national dialogue on race. He emphasizes that there is no majority race in Hawaii; California will have no majority race in less than a decade, and our country will have no majority race in 50 years. The face of America will change over the next 50 years. Our responsibility is to make certain that this change strengthens our national fabric and fortifies the bonds of citizenship among all Americans.

Asians and Hispanics are the fastest-growing racial groups. Americans of Asian and Pacific Islander descent number 10 million and that figure is forecast to double early in the next century. The label Asian Pacific American encompasses a broad range of ethnic groups whose histories are as diverse as their lands of origin. The earliest immigrants--Chinese, Japanese, South Asian Indians, Koreans, and Filipinos--and the most recent refugees --Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians--all experienced similar, yet unique journeys as they crossed the Pacific to venture to a new land of opportunity. Although, more often than not, Asian Pacific Americans, are perceived as more Asian than American, and more foreign than native, Asian Pacific Americans have actually been in this country for hundreds of years.

The Chinese were the first Asian immigrants to enter the United States in large numbers. They initially came as sojourners, intending to return to China after they made their riches in gold.

Once here, they helped build the great transcontinental railroads of the 19th Century; worked in the manufacturing industries; and started small businesses in communities around the country.

Anti-Chinese sentiment led to the passage of Chinese exclusion laws in the 1880s. After these laws, other Asian immigrant groups were recruited to fill the labor shortage. The number of Japanese immigrants rose steadily, mostly in Hawaii and the western states. They were followed by Filipinos who began coming to America in significant numbers early this century. They worked side by side with the Japanese immigrants in the sugarcane fields of Hawaii and worked in fisheries, agricultural, and service industries along the West Coast.

Opportunities, however, were not as plentiful as they would have hoped. From the Chinese Exclusion Laws, which restricted immigration on a racial basis, to Executive Order 9066, which resulted in the internment of more than 110,000 Japanese Americans and their immigrant relatives, life in America, at times, proved to be a nightmare rather than the promised American Dream. But despite all obstacles, these intrepid immigrants toiled and sacrificed in order to make this country their own and to secure the American dream for their

American children. They helped build our railroads, labored on our farms, worked endless factory hours, and formed the backbone of many small businesses.

As we prepare for the future and pursue new opportunities, we should never forget their experiences and their contributions. They are part of our nation's history.

America is defined by the grand, entangled progress of its individual peoples to and across the American landscape--through exploration, the slave trade, immigration, or internal migration--that gave rise to the rich interactions that make the American experience unique. We embody the cultures and traditions that our forebears brought from other shores, as well as the new traditions and cultures that we adopted on arrival. The history of the peopling of America offers great insight into the constituent cultures that have come to shape our pluralist society. The preservation of this history is an area of particular interest to me.

For instance, as all of you know, Angel Island holds mixed feelings for many Chinese Americans. From 1910 to 1940, Angel Island was the main gateway for Pacific immigration, processing more than a million immigrants from Asia, but it was also used to discourage Chinese immigration, which had been limited by law. Thousands of Chinese immigrants were detained at Angel Island, interrogated about their eligibility to immigrate, and detained for weeks, months, and even years before being deported.

On the walls of the Immigration Station, you can still read poems written by some of the detainees. One in particular captured the essence of the Angel Island immigration experience. I would like to share it with you:

*Originally, I had intended to come to America last year.
Lack of money delayed me until early autumn.
It was on the day that the Weaver Maiden met the Cowherd
That I took passage on the President Lincoln.
I ate wind and tasted waves for more than twenty days.
Fortunately, I arrived safely on the American continent.
I thought I could land in a few days.
How was I to know I would become a prisoner suffering in the
wooden building?
The barbarians' abuse is really difficult to take.
When my family's circumstances stir my emotions, a double stream
of tears flow.*

*I only wish I can land in San Francisco soon,
Thus sparing me this additional sorrow here.*

This heartbreaking poem, however sorrowful, also reflects the universal hope of immigrants to this country for a better life.

To help celebrate this hope and to preserve the unique experience of the Chinese and others who immigrated from the Pacific, I have requested \$100,000 in Congressional appropriations to fund a National Park Service study to determine the feasibility of establishing a West Coast immigration history complex, similar to Ellis Island on the East Coast, at Golden Gate National Recreation Area, which includes the Presidio and Angel Island. Celebrating the Chinese immigration experience, as reflected in Angel Island, would be a central function of the proposed museum complex.

I believe that the history and heritage of all America's people should be accessible to our citizens. Ellis Island is a wonderful facility, but it largely reflects only the European immigration experience. Americans need to know not just the struggles and triumphs of the English, Irish, Germans, Italians, and Poles, but also of the unique travails of those whose forbears came from Africa, from Latin American, from the Middle East, from the Pacific islands, and, of course, from Asia.

This is important not just from an equity viewpoint, but because it is absolutely essential to our future. As I mentioned earlier, by the middle of the next century every American will become a minority. In this context, understanding each other's diverse history, values, and cultures will play a crucial role in determining how well we work together and flourish as a nation. For it is only by appreciating our differences that we can begin to appreciate our commonalities-- the allegiances, interests, and experiences that bind us together. These shared aspirations and sacrifices are unifying experiences, transforming our diverse heritages into a national panorama.

I welcome OCA's participation in the effort to establish the "Ellis Island West" initiative. I hope that the entire Chinese American community will contribute its energy and resources to this project, which will help publicize and celebrate an overlooked chapter in our national history. I would also like to recognize the recent passing of Mr. Paul Chow, a prominent member of the San Francisco Chinese community, who helped lead the effort to preserve and restore the Angel Island Immigration Station, which last May was designated a National Historic Landmark.

All of the early immigrants are truly pioneers, and they show how Asian

Pacific Americans have played an instrumental role in industrializing and developing our country. Today, Asian Pacific Americans continue the legacy of these early pioneers. Asian Pacific Americans contribute to every sector of our society. They are in board rooms, laboratories, universities, Congress, statehouses, the judiciary, government agencies, the performing arts, and sports. They are architects like I.M. Pei, scientists like AIDS researcher David Ho, statesmen like my friend and colleague Dan Inouye, public servants like Bill Lann Lee, writers like Maxine Hong Kingston, musicians like conductor Zubin Mehta, filmmakers like Chris Tashima, innovators and business leaders like Jerry Yang and Andrea Jung, NASA astronauts like Leroy Chiao and Hawaii's own Edward Tsang Lu, sports heroes like Michelle Kwan, and warriors like General Eric Shinseki.

The accomplishments of these and other Asian Pacific Americans speak to what is possible in our country; the realization of America's great potential and the reward for hard work and hope.

Unfortunately, the scope of Asian Pacific accomplishments is too often overshadowed by insensitivity and ignorance. For example, during last year's investigation of campaign finance abuses, the distinction between foreign donors and Asian American donors was frequently blurred by the media and by members of both political parties. A front page headline in the Washington Post trumpeted an "Asian Funds Network." However, upon careful examination of the article, the reader found the article was principally concerned with Asian Americans, not Asians. Clearly, to some people, "Asian and Asian American" are synonymous, unlike the case with Europeans and European Americans. In fact, the distinction European Americans is rarely heard in public dialogue because the ethnic origin of European Americans is not presumed to have a bearing on their patriotism.

Investigations into improper and illegal fundraising during the 1996 elections raised questions about the practices of the Clinton and Dole campaigns and crossed racial and national boundaries.

Yet, it would be difficult to dispute that members of the press have paid an exorbitant amount of attention to the heritage and citizenship of Asian American and Asian individuals.

The implication shared by the worst instances of this coverage is that being of Asian ancestry somehow renders one less American.

It reminds us that Asian Pacific Americans, whatever their achievements, whatever their contributions to the nation, are still perceived by some as

foreigners, whether fifth or first generation. While our nation, in my lifetime, has made tremendous progress toward protecting civil rights and extending equal opportunity to all Americans, much remains to be done.

The perpetuation of this attitude is driven home in the very thoughtful four-part series on the Asian American experience in California that the Los Angeles Times ran this week.

The series spoke of the influence of Asian Americans upon our national culture, economy, and cuisine, while at the same time, Asian Americans are not viewed as part of American society or included as part of our national identity or experience. As we work to preserve our ethnic heritage and culture, and make the most of the opportunities and responsibilities we face as Americans, today's challenges are not so far removed from those faced by the first Asian immigrants to these shores.

We cannot and should not overlook painful and shameful episodes in our nation's history. Whether it be slavery and its legacy of racism and violence, or religious intolerance against Catholics and Jews, anti-immigrant and anti-Chinese laws and prejudice in the 19th and 20th Century, or the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, our country has sometimes stumbled in protecting and respecting fundamental human rights.

However, the true greatness of America rises from our fidelity to the ideals of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and the free exchange of ideas. Our nation was founded on these ideals, and they are the heart of our Constitution and Bill of Rights. We may never realize perfection, but we must never shrink from our commitment to do better, to make our country stronger.

Our capability, indeed our responsibility, "to form a more perfect Union" represents America's enduring strength and safeguards freedom here and abroad.

When we work on behalf of civil rights--whether it be for legal immigrants denied food stamps, or African Americans facing discrimination in housing, or Asian guest workers facing exploitation and abuse in the Northern Marianas--we strengthen our democracy and secure our liberty. Protecting human rights at home is the strongest way to advocate for freedom and human rights around the world.

Obstacles and bumps in the road must bring our community together and not dampen our spirits. I have spoken out against racial bigotry and unfair treatment on the Senate floor and will continue to do so. I am encouraged that

my colleagues and many in the media recognize the prejudice and harm which arise from mischaracterization and insinuation.

And despite the recent controversies, Asian Pacific Americans are making notable strides in the political process.

In 1996, over 75,000 new Asian Pacific Americans registered to vote, bringing the total to 1.3 million nationwide. Asian American voters are evenly split among Democratic, Republican, and independent registration. No party can or should take APAs for granted.

The rise in Asian participation in politics is encouraging. The election of Gary Locke as the first Asian Pacific American governor in one of the Mainland states is a milestone. Asian Pacific American organizations, like OCA, are working across the country to nurture and provide new Asian Pacific American leaders, educating the population at large regarding APA issues, and getting more Asian Pacific Americans involved in the political process.

We bring our own unique cultural values and talents to the American mix. We are rightly proud of our contributions to the rich national mosaic.

I am Native Hawaiian and Chinese, but above all I am American. I have embraced all of my identities and hope each and every citizen will reflect on our nation's multiple heritages and appreciate the relationship between our racial and ethnic diversity and the unity that binds us together as Americans. To achieve economic, social, and political parity for Chinese Americans and all Asian Pacific Americans, we must all work together--Asian, black, white, Native American, and Hispanic--to ensure equality and opportunity for all Americans. This is the true promise of America and the source of our nation's greatness and unique place in history, and it is the greatest challenge we continue to face as a nation.

I am proud that OCA has been fighting the good fight for these past 25 years. Your vision and commitment to civil rights and equal opportunity for all Americans is as important in 1998 as it was in 1973. I urge you to keep up the good work!

Thank you and aloha.