

Speeches and messages: 1968 (1 of 2): Why can't the negro be like you?

Senator Daniel K. Inouye Papers

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Speech by Senator Daniel K. Inouye
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WHY CAN'T THE NEGRO BE LIKE YOU?

Just before I left Washington, an acquaintance called at my office. A prominent businessman, he was concerned about the threat of more riots in the cities and the resultant loss in human life and property.

After a brief discussion of the problem, he looked at me and said: "Why can't the Negro be like you? Your grandfather not only had nothing but owed a large debt when he crossed many thousands of miles of ocean to a strange land -- Hawaii.

"He and your father were dirt farmers, simple tillers of the soil. Yet today, you sit as one of the 100 members of the most exclusive club in this nation -- the United States Senate. Tell me, why can't the Negro be like you?"

This afternoon, I want to share with you my thoughts on this question which has been asked again and again by countless Americans representing a wide variety of ethnic groups.

The question is asked by Poles, Jews, Italians, Irish, Japanese and Chinese, by all those Americans of foreign ancestry who believe that they have successfully scaled the ladder of economic success in this country.

Why can't the Negro be like us?

Because I am not a Negro, my answers will doubtless be conditioned by my upbringing and my environment and many Negroes will contend that I have no right to even attempt to answer this question.

Nevertheless, I am a member of a minority ethnic group in this country. I also evolved from a background of real poverty by today's standards and my family surmounted many difficulties in its battle for survival. But these facts do not place me on the same level as the Negro. There are many, many differences. Let me enumerate some of them.

First of all, my skin is not black. That skin color alone blurs the person behind it and ignites old prejudices which have smoldered in this country for generations.

My skin is yellow but for all practical purposes I am accepted as a member of white society. No police officer is liable to hail me as "Boy" or "Nigger" when he wants my attention. It makes a world of difference.

Secondly, my grandfather came to this country as a free man. True, he was under contract to work for meager wages but he did not come as a slave. Even as a poor immigrant, he enjoyed certain Constitutional rights under the U.S. flag and he was not prevented from exercising them.

Now some will say, "Sure the Negroes first came here as slaves. But that was more than a hundred years ago. What's that got to do with what's going on today? "

The fact is that the events of a century ago can have a definite impact on the happenings in 20th century America. Let me give you an example.

There has been much criticism leveled against the Negro on the grounds that he has no appreciation of what we call the family unit. These critics point to the countless thousands of households in hundreds of American cities where there is no father, no man in the house.

If we go back to the early days of the African slave trade, I think we can find some evidence as to why the Negroes have a matriarchal society today.

In those days, great raiding parties cut deep into Africa to herd black men, women and children to the coastal slave markets. Here they were sold as so many animals and with much less dignity than we buy and sell horses today.

Stripped of their rags, they were examined by buyers who wanted healthy specimens who could reproduce their kind and bring even more money into the coffers of the cotton plantations. Hardened buyers, immune to the wails of the fearful, fingered their muscles, examined their organs and even forced their mouths open to check their teeth as they would a horse.

The sick or malingering were cast aside, perhaps consigned to live out their pitiful lives in the service of some petty desert sheik who lacked sufficient gold to compete with the monied merchants of the New World.

These slaves could not communicate with their masters, but even if they could, there was no law to protect them. They were regarded as chattel and could be bought and sold, used as security, and disposed of like any other personal property.

Their owners enjoyed the power of life and death over them and slaves could be killed without inviting punishment. The act was comparable to shooting a dog.

Once on the plantation, healthy male slaves were ordered to cohabit with female slaves to produce children. The children in turn were bought and sold when they reached a marketable age. Negro couples were often separated and their children were denied them.

Nor was it uncommon for white masters to take liberties with female slaves of their choice. The women had no alternative unless they chose death.

There was no dignity in this society for the Negro father, no way that he could demonstrate his manhood. He could only look forward to further bowing and scraping - total and abject submission. This is the cultural tradition of the Negro father of today.

When slavery was finally abolished in this country, many Negroes went North to the cities where they found themselves unwelcome in decent society. Their slavery background, coupled with a total lack of formal education, made it impossible to compete with their white counterparts in an effort to earn adequate living.

But there was still one recourse for starving Negro families in some communities. Compassionate political leaders in some cities had instituted welfare programs limited to destitute families. These families were given the barest minimums of food, clothing and shelter, just enough to enable them to survive.

But every state, including Hawaii at one time, provided that no family was eligible for welfare benefits as long as that family included an able-bodied man.

That law prevails to this day in many U. S. communities and it is that law which encourages the unemployed male Negro to stay away from his family so they can remain eligible for welfare benefits.

This then is the American tradition, the American way. Now let us look at another country which dealt with the slavery problem with very different results.

Brazil had a slave trade which began years before our own. But today the descendants of those slaves are not burning or looting the cities. Perhaps it is because in Brazil they are fully integrated members of Brazilian society.

The great political influence of the Catholic Church in Brazil in the time of the slave trade made the difference. The church declared that slaves were human beings who, although they led unfortunate lives, were still children of God.

If a Brazilian male slave was ordered to live with a female, he had first to be married by a priest. Not only was the union sanctified by the church, but the couple and their children could not be separated. And so in Brazil, as the result of religious laws, the family unit concept was maintained to this day.

Unlike other Americans, the Negro is unable to point with pride to his ancestors for there is no written record of the family tree, no old family Bible in which names can be traced back for generations as I can go back ten generations in my own family.

So we can see that in earlier years of our history, we destroyed the Negro's dignity, took away his manhood, and left him bereft of any pride in his cultural heritage. Even his name is not his own.

But what about public education? Wasn't this an opportunity for the Negro to better himself so that he could compete in a white society?

With the "emancipation" following the Civil War, American Negroes could look forward to sharing in America's bounties during the Reconstruction period. The first Civil Rights law was passed in 1875 and it gave Negroes the right to equal accommodations, facilities and the advantages of public transportation, inns, theaters, and places of public amusement. But there were no effective enforcement provisions in the law and it was poorly enforced.

Then there was the Ku Klux Klan, a secret organization dedicated to the reestablishment of white supremacy in the land. Negroes who had held public office or voted were barred from jobs and one group bragged of having killed 116 Negroes and having them thrown into the Tallahatchie River.

A public education for Negroes? In those days, it was out of the question. Later Negroes were to be guaranteed separate but equal education facilities. But they were never really equal and they insured the Negro of an inferior education.

Poverty-stricken Negroes, denied equal job opportunities because they did not have equal educational opportunities, suffer from diet deficiencies and are often unaware of potential health needs.

Because of this, about 30 per cent, nearly one out of three, of all families earning less than \$2,000 a year suffer from chronic health conditions that adversely affect their employment as compared with less than 8 per cent of families with incomes of \$7,000 or more.

The Negro can expect an infant mortality rate from two to three times that of the white citizen. He is often unable to maintain sanitary conditions at home because he can't buy a refrigerator or a freezer and he has learned to expect inadequate garbage collection services in the slums.

He will pay more for his pitiful slum dwelling than he might expect to pay for comparable facilities in many suburbs. One Negro may pay only \$15 a month but you may find six living in his apartment, each paying \$15 a month.

He pays more for his groceries, more for his furniture, more for his liquor, more for his borrowing on credit, even though he can least afford such charges. And today, many thousands of Negroes with medals for valor earned in Vietnam and some crippled for life by enemy bullets and grenades are returning to the ghettos to find little, if any, improvement in living conditions. Is it any wonder, then, that some Negroes are led to looting and arson in a blind rage against society.

The history of America is replete with a record of Negro repression for generations and this dates from colonial times. In 1776, one out of every six residents of this country was a slave. The post Civil War era destroyed the dawning hopes of Negroes once more. Some Negro soldiers who returned from World War I were lynched in their uniforms. In World War II, they were accepted only in separate noncombat units. Desegregation of the military was not ordered until 1949.

Over the years a large body of literature came into being to "prove" that Negroes were subhumans after all. Only last month in Washington, we learned that a major American corporation, which manufactures x-ray machines, admitted that it had mistakenly advised its customers to give Negroes a heavier dose rate of x-rays than whites because their skin and bones were more difficult to penetrate. The belief proved to be totally without foundation.

Even the educated Negro finds little to cheer him in America. The school books were written for whites and contain only white history. He will search in vain for major works on the Negro's cultural contributions to this country.

We tend to forget that when the great bulk of our European and Asiatic immigrants came to this country, America was building a great urban-industrial society and jobs for the unskilled were plentiful. In Hawaii the plantations provided the jobs.

Today, however, industry seeks the skilled worker as the result of increasing automation on the assembly lines. This means that new methods of escape must be found for the Negro.

Some say money is the only answer -- money in the billions. While I admit that enormous sums must be spent on this problem once the demands of Vietnam are eased, I submit that money alone will never solve the problem.

White Americans, and Americans of every ethnic group, must learn to understand the true magnitude of the Negro problem and the reasons for its existence.

Only with this understanding can come the willingness to assist Negroes, to offer them a helping hand, to insist upon their equal rights, and to freely support the cost of Federal programs designed to regenerate them.

I believe that such an education program should be instituted now in every American public school. The children, as children will, can then educate their parents.

Needless to say, our nation's effort to regenerate and rehabilitate our black citizens cannot be a one-way affair. White society cannot be expected to unconditionally yield to the demands of some of the militant Negro leaders, nor can the Negro expect to receive unlimited assistance. The success of our program will depend to a great degree upon the attitude of the Negro community. Unfair though it may sound, the Negro will have to try a little harder. The Negro is faced with a great challenge.

Much will be expected of him. He will now have the supreme opportunity of demonstrating to his white neighbors that the slurs and insults suggesting Negro immorality and inferiority are all cruel and baseless lies. We stand ready to help but he must also help himself.

In closing, I beg every one of you here today to resolve to study this problem and to understand it in your hearts. If you can do this, you will have made a major contribution toward the development of that truly free society that we all seek. Think of the disadvantaged American when we recite the following:

"One nation under God, indivisible with liberty and justice for all."