

Daniel K. Akaka

1924–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE 1977–1990

UNITED STATES SENATOR 1990–2013

DEMOCRAT FROM HAWAII

As the first Native Hawaiian in the U.S. Senate, Daniel K. Akaka used his genial nature and influence in committee to effect change on the national stage. During his 36 years of service in the House and Senate, Akaka built up significant loyalty in Hawaii and within the Democratic Party. However, success eluded him on his signature piece of legislation, a law elevating Native Hawaiians to tribal status with all the privileges commensurate with that designation. “I am not a born politician,” Akaka said of his congressional experience. “People tell me I have to be feisty to get my way in Congress. But that’s not my style. I use my Hawaiian abilities and the spirit of Aloha that brings people together.”¹

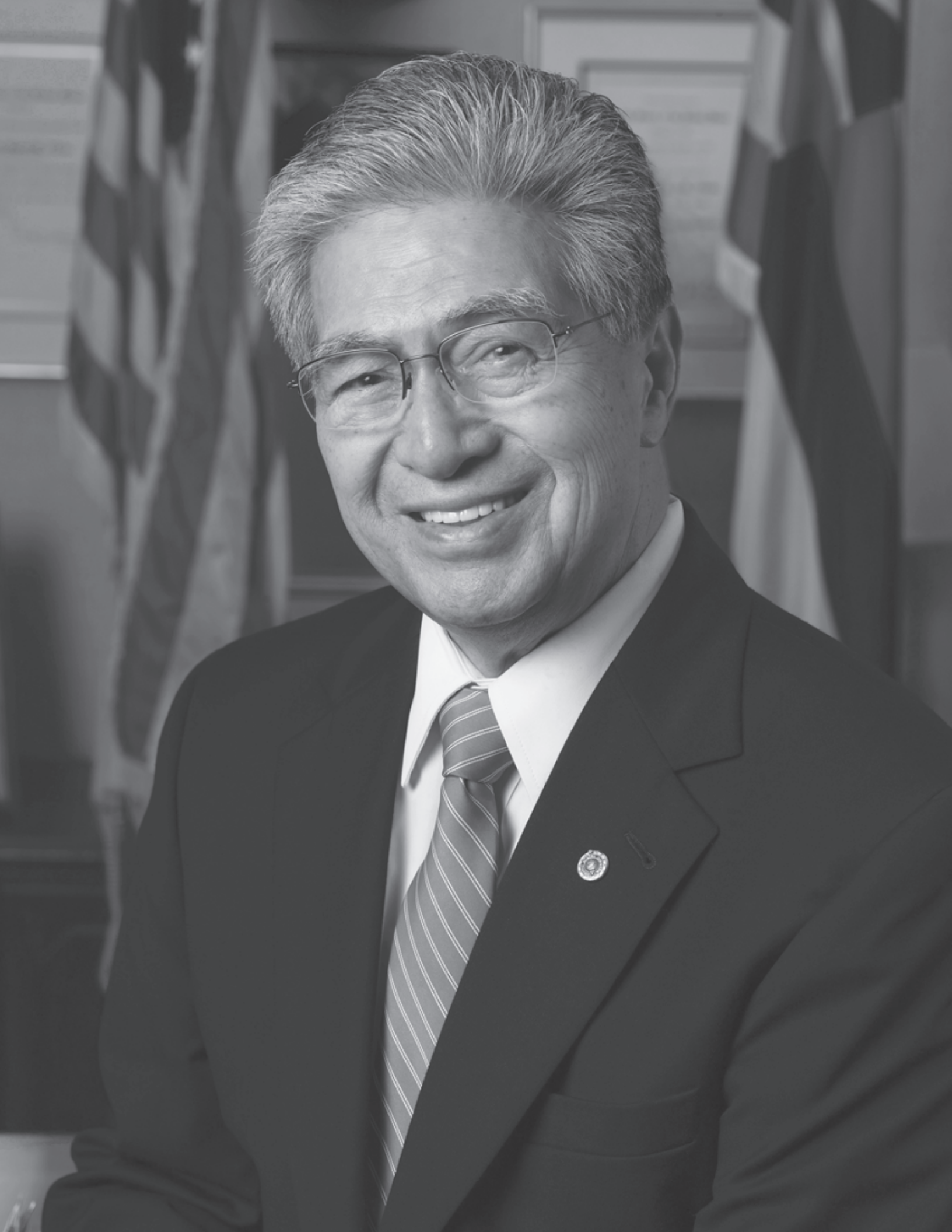
Daniel Kahikina Akaka was born on September 11, 1924, in Honolulu, Hawaii, the son of Kahikina Akaka and Annie Kahoa. His ethnic Chinese father processed sugar and worked as a molder for the Honolulu Ironworks. His Native Hawaiian mother was a homemaker who raised Daniel and his seven brothers and sisters. The family lived in a two-bedroom home with a separate building for the kitchen, cooking on a wood stove.² Akaka’s family was devoutly religious, a quality that stayed with Akaka throughout his life. He briefly considered following his older brother, Abraham, into the ministry before committing himself to education. He remained close with Abraham, whom he invited to act as a guest chaplain in the House in 1977 and the Senate in 1991.³

Akaka attended public schools in Honolulu and graduated from the Kamehameha School for Boys in 1942. After high school, he followed in his father’s footsteps and began working as a civilian welder and mechanic for the Hawaiian Electric Company. He joined the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers upon being drafted in 1945 and received an honorable discharge from the Army in 1947. He then served as the first mate on the schooner *Morning*

Star out of Hawaii for a year. In 1948 Akaka married Mary Mildred Chong, with whom he had five children, Alan, Millannie, Daniel Jr., Nicholas, and Gerard.

After his year at sea, Akaka attended the University of Hawaii, where he received a bachelor’s degree in education in 1952, using benefits from the GI Bill to pay his way. Akaka earned his professional certificate in secondary education and began teaching in 1953 at Kahuku High School. He then moved on to Pearl Harbor Intermediate School and ended his teaching career in elementary schools in suburban Oahu in 1960. After acquiring his professional school administrator’s certificate, Akaka transitioned into school administration. He had also worked for the Hawaii department of education as an education program specialist beginning in 1953, a position he held for 18 years.⁴ While working as a principal in the Oahu school system, Akaka completed a master’s degree in education from the University of Hawaii in 1966. Three years later Akaka became chief program planner for compensatory education for the Hawaii department of education. From 1971 to 1974, he served as director of the Hawaii office of economic opportunity.

Akaka’s ascension through the ranks of the Hawaii education department caught the attention of longtime Democratic godfather Governor John Burns.⁵ Constantly on the lookout for fresh talent, Burns regularly invited Akaka to the governor’s mansion to eat breakfast and discuss the need for a Native-Hawaiian presence in politics. “I had never thought about it before then,” Akaka admitted.⁶ Incapacitated by cancer late in his third term, Burns urged Akaka to transition from administration to politics. In 1974 Akaka ran in the Democratic primary to be George R. Ariyoshi’s running mate for governor. Ariyoshi specifically wanted Akaka on the ticket for lieutenant governor as a Native Hawaiian.





Maintaining a careful ethnic balance in Hawaiian politics had long been a common practice carefully managed by party elites. However, Akaka entered the campaign late and was defeated by Nelson Doi, who went on to win the election for lieutenant governor alongside Ariyoshi. Ariyoshi then hired Akaka as a special assistant in the governor's office, where he served from 1975 to 1976.⁷ Akaka's political interest in helping Native Hawaiians began as Governor Ariyoshi's aide when he was directed to organize a program under the Native American Act in Hawaii. During this time, he helped forge the beginnings of ALU LIKE, a nonprofit organization formed to help increase opportunities and standards of living for Native Hawaiians while preserving their unique culture.⁸

A chain of events created a giant vacuum on the national level for Hawaii when Senator Hiram L. Fong retired in 1976. Both of Hawaii's U.S. Representatives, Spark M. Matsunaga and Patsy Takemoto Mink, announced their candidacies to replace the Senator, setting off an intraparty fight among Democrats and opening up both of Hawaii's congressional seats. Akaka declared his candidacy for Mink's seat, which included most of the land outside the population center of Honolulu except for the smaller northwestern islands. He faced Republican Hank Inouye (no relation to Senator Daniel K. Inouye) among other third-party candidates. Akaka ran away with the election, securing 80 percent of the vote.⁹

A liberal Democrat, Akaka tended to vote the party line on the majority of legislation, which helped him advance within the House. Though he often differentiated himself from his party by supporting defense programs largely due to the military bases on Hawaiian soil, Akaka voted with party leadership on issues they deemed essential. As one example, Akaka was crucial to a successful attempt by Democratic leadership to block President Ronald Reagan's funding for the MX missile. Akaka initially voted for the bill, but changed his mind when Illinois Democrat Marty Russo carried him from a phone booth to the chamber to change his vote.¹⁰

Akaka developed a "Hawaiian style" rapport with his House colleagues. He rejected a more showy or flashy style

on the Hill, instead becoming more well known among Members of Congress for his soft-spoken, but affable, manner. Akaka devoted his time in the House to acquiring funding for his home state and focusing on Hawaiian issues, appearing "quietly competent" without gaining visibility either nationally or broadly across Hawaii.¹¹

As a freshman House Member, Akaka was tapped to serve on four separate committees, including the Agriculture Committee and the Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee, both key assignments to oversee legislation affecting Hawaiian industries. Akaka's longest service was on the Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control, where he spent much of his time attempting to draw attention to the drug abuse problems on the islands and writing harsher sentences for dealers.¹² His broader agenda included protection of the sugar and merchant marine industries in Hawaii and fostering a stronger relationship between Hawaii and the federal government. Akaka specifically developed a reputation for being a friend of federal workers, who comprised a large part of his constituency. From 1978 through his final House election in 1988, Akaka never received fewer than 75 percent of the vote. Akaka never went uncontested and usually faced a Libertarian opponent, but for many of these elections, Republicans failed to put forward an opponent.¹³

Akaka entered Congress with the hope of securing a seat on the Appropriations Committee, but was told not to expect much, coming from a small state. He recognized the difficulty of his position. "You cannot get into the committee unless somebody dies, or somebody resigns or leaves the House." When a seat did open up during his second term, Akaka aggressively pursued it and reminded Speaker Tip O'Neill of Massachusetts of his unwavering loyalty. "I think that made a difference," Akaka recalled, "because the next day, Charlie Rangel [of New York] called me and said, 'Danny, you're in.'"¹⁴ From the Appropriations Committee and its Agriculture Subcommittee, Akaka supported the causes of the sugar and pineapple industry, tourism, and environmental protection, issues that loomed large for his constituency. He also continued his advocacy for Native Hawaiians.



Akaka focused on that behind-the-scenes approach to legislating particularly through his seat on the House Appropriations Committee, where he coordinated with fellow Hawaiian Daniel Inouye on the Senate Appropriations Committee.

When Senator Spark Matsunaga died in 1990, Governor John Waihee III appointed Representative Akaka to finish out Matsunaga's unexpired term. Akaka delayed taking the Senate oath of office in order to ensure House passage of funding for various projects relevant to Hawaii, using his seat on the powerful Appropriations Committee. It was unlikely he would be in the same position to influence legislation upon entering the Senate.¹⁵

Akaka's appointment officially began on May 16, 1990, but he still had to weather a special election in November to fill the remaining four years of Matsunaga's term. His fellow Representative from Hawaii, moderate Republican Patricia Saiki, declared her candidacy to challenge Akaka, and polls placed them in a dead heat. Saiki entered the race with the full backing of the George H. W. Bush presidential administration. With the potential to retake the Senate in 1990, Republicans made the contest a top priority. Akaka waved off the President's endorsement of his opponent, "I know what I'm up against: the White House. I don't think they know what they're up against."¹⁶

Saiki, with support from the national party, led Akaka in the polls as late as October. While the campaign between the two former teachers remained largely polite and, therefore, true to Hawaiian "Aloha" values, Akaka hit hard on his early Senate service, particularly his work for the sugar industry as well as his party bona fides, in an overwhelmingly Democratic state. "If it were not for the Democrats and the Democratic majority in Congress, Hawaii would suffer," Akaka claimed.¹⁷ In his tightest race since 1976, Akaka won with 54 percent of the vote, surpassing media expectations.¹⁸ Surprisingly, he drew large Japanese-American support despite Representative Saiki's prominent position within that influential Hawaiian community.

Akaka made an immediate impression in the Senate by passing an amendment in the Energy and Natural Resources Committee to rename a scientific research bill in

honor of the late Senator Matsunaga, who had authored it. In July Akaka led the effort to defeat New Jersey Senator Bill Bradley's proposal to lower sugar price supports. Bradley's amendment to the annual farm bill would lower price supports for sugar by 2 cents a pound. Bradley denounced the support as "the S&L of the farm program," a reference to the bankrupt savings and loan industry.¹⁹ Akaka built a bipartisan coalition to defeat the measure, and his motion to table Bradley's amendment passed 54 to 44 on July 24, 1990. After his success, Akaka proudly said of his maneuver against Bradley, a former basketball star, "I'm only 5-feet-7, but I slam-dunked him." He touted his triumph as proof of his legislative effectiveness in the 1990 special election.²⁰

Akaka was initially appointed to three committees in the 101st Congress (1989–1991): Energy and Natural Resources; Veterans' Affairs; and Governmental Affairs.²¹ He served on the latter two committees throughout his tenure in the Senate. His reputation as an ally of federal employees grew out of his position on the Governmental Affairs Committee, renamed the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs in 2005 in response to the executive reorganization in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks. He chaired the Federal Workforce Subcommittee and regularly reached across the aisle on behalf of federal employees alongside Senators George Voinovich of Ohio and Susan Collins of Maine, both Republicans. Akaka often referred to Voinovich as a "brother," and he engineered whistleblower protection legislation with Senator Collins.

Akaka was the primary sponsor on the Whistleblower Protection Enhancement Act of 2012, which passed the Senate by unanimous consent. Federal worker groups credit him for streamlining the federal hiring process, encouraging telework options, and shepherding to passage the Non-Foreign Area Retirement Equity Assurance Act of 2009, which shifted federal employees in Hawaii, Alaska, and U.S. territories from broad nonforeign cost-of-living adjustments to fairer locality pay levels. The president of the Partnership for Public Service lauded Akaka, "He's not flashy, but he is immensely substantive."²²



Akaka served on the Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs Committee during the 107th Congress (2001–2003) and again during his final term from 2007 through 2013. Akaka helped to develop the Dodd–Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act in 2010, authoring the section of the bill establishing the Office of Financial Education in the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau and creating grant programs for consumer education.

Akaka attempted to offer alternatives to predatory financial products like high-interest payday loans. Long an advocate of financial literacy and education, Akaka also sponsored the Excellence in Economic Education Act (S. 1487) in the 106th Congress (1999–2001), which provided federal funding for teacher training and school activities for economic education. Much of his bill passed as part of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002.

Akaka also sponsored the Credit Card Minimum Payment Warning Act, much of which found its way into the Credit Card Accountability Responsibility and Disclosure Act of 2009. The relevant portions necessitated a box, referred to by his colleagues as the “Akaka Box,” on credit card statements that simply displayed the minimum payments required to pay an outstanding balance within 36 months.²³

As a member of the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee (1990–2013), Akaka helped to expand federal support for veterans and honor their service with education benefits and medal awards. In 1996 he launched a review of World War II records which led to more than 30 medals being distributed in 2000 to retroactively honor the service of Asian-American soldiers, including Senator Inouye. As chairman of the committee (2007–2011), Akaka pushed the panel to authorize the largest increase ever in funding for the Veterans Administration in 2007. Akaka collaborated with Virginia Senator Jim Webb to rework the GI Bill for veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Akaka and Inouye also provided compensation for Filipino veterans who fought under the U.S. flag in World War II. After many different iterations of the Filipino veterans’ bill, the pair finally secured funding in the 2009 stimulus bill through a combined effort, using their positions on the Veterans’ Affairs and Appropriations Committees.²⁴

Despite having a hand in major pieces of legislation, much of Akaka’s work happened behind the scenes to support his state and fellow Asian Americans. “You don’t see him introducing legislation or much important legislation,” a political observer once noted. “He rarely speaks on the floor. He might be effectively talking one on one with other senators, but no one would see that.”²⁵ Akaka arranged for a Federal Emergency Management Agency office to be located in Hawaii in 1993 following Hurricane Iniki.²⁶ He maintained an interest in the protection of the natural Hawaiian environment, and he lobbied for the creation of new national parks. Akaka also supported prohibiting the use of U.S. territories in the Pacific as nuclear waste disposal sites, safeguards against introduction of alien species to Hawaii, and the foundation of the Spark M. Matsunaga Renewable Energy and Ocean Technology Center at Keahole Point.²⁷

With his Senate appointment in 1990, Akaka became the first Native Hawaiian to serve in that body. Throughout his Senate career, Akaka devoted considerable effort to representing Asian Americans broadly and Native Hawaiians specifically. Akaka helped found the Asian Pacific American Caucus in 1994 and briefly served as its secretary. In 1997 Akaka delivered a stirring condemnation of anti-Asian prejudice on the Senate Floor, specifically denouncing the belittling of Asian-American contributions to the political process in the wake of fundraising scandals featuring Asian-American businessmen and politicians.²⁸

In 1993 Akaka secured congressional and presidential apologies for the U.S.-backed 1893 overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy. Senators Akaka and Inouye both lamented the nature of the kingdom’s toppling as a cultural loss. After little debate, the resolution (S.J. Res. 19) passed 65 to 34.²⁹ Akaka introduced the Senate version (S. 1763) of the Stand Against Violence and Empower Native Women Act in 2011, which was folded into the Violence Against Women Act in 2013, extending protections to Native-American and Native-Hawaiian women.³⁰

His signature legislation grew out of his support for Native Hawaiians. Serving on the Permanent Select Committee on Indian Affairs, Akaka threw his weight



behind indigenous Hawaiians following a 2000 Supreme Court ruling that struck down a Hawaiian practice in which state officials responsible for dispensing aid to Native Hawaiians were elected by Native Hawaiians. The Court deemed unconstitutional the racial basis for determining these voters. Less than six months later, Senator Akaka and Hawaii Representative Neil Abercrombie first introduced the Native Hawaiian Government Reorganization Act, which became known over time as the “Akaka Bill.” The bill reconstituted the Kingdom of Hawaii as a Native-Hawaiian tribal unit similar to other Native-American tribes in the United States, allowing for “government-to-government” interactions and other privileges extended to Native-American tribes.³¹

Proponents of the original legislation argued that Native Hawaiians faced discrimination and loss of opportunity because they lacked the long history of treaties that tribes on the mainland had made with the federal government.³² Hawaiian Representative Mazie K. Hirono pointed out in 2007 that indigenous Hawaiians, while having no treaties with the federal government, did have a long history of federal statutes providing unique protections for them as a group. In essence, she argued, the bill would be an extension of current federal policy since the United States already treated Native Hawaiians as an indigenous group.³³ Opponents claimed the bill could lead to “an impermissible racial preference in the establishment and operation of a government entity” and likened it to “the ethnic Balkanization of the country.”³⁴

A specific grievance levied against the Akaka bill noted that, unlike other native tribes, Native Hawaiians tended not to live together in one community continuously, but would be accounted for essentially by race, according to this legislation.³⁵ Akaka himself said in the 2009 hearing on the bill that the legislation was merely intended to provide parity, to grant only the same privileges to Native Hawaiians already provided to other native tribes.³⁶

Senator John Ensign of Nevada feared that the bill would lead to legal gambling on Native-Hawaiian land and repeatedly placed holds on it. In response, Akaka led the Hawaiian delegation in inserting a provision into the

bill that prevented any new Native-Hawaiian government from authorizing gambling.³⁷ Akaka gathered support from an overwhelming majority of Democrats and several Republicans, including allies in Alaska and Republican Governor Linda Lingle of Hawaii. However, President George W. Bush promised to veto the bill. As a result, it languished in Senate committees.

The original bill passed the House in 2000 and 2007, but never made it to a vote on the Senate Floor. Akaka reintroduced the bill each Congress following the 107th Congress. It briefly gained some traction during the 2008 presidential campaign. Then Senator Barack Obama, who was born in Hawaii, spent much of his youth there, and attended high school in Honolulu, vowed to sign the Akaka bill, if elected. Akaka grew more optimistic about the measure’s prospects after the 2008 elections increased the Democratic majority in the Senate and ushered Obama into the presidency.³⁸

After the bill stagnated under anonymous holds in the Senate for much of the 111th Congress (2009–2011), the Department of Justice requested revisions in 2010. Governor Lingle rejected those revisions and withdrew her support from the bill, which shrank Republican support in the Senate.³⁹ Unable to overcome Republican opposition, Akaka’s efforts sputtered at the close of the 111th Congress. He reintroduced the bill in the 112th Congress (2011–2013), but had no real expectations of passage.

During the struggles to reconcile the bill in 2010, Akaka said of the legislation, “Over the last 10 years we have held hearings, considered various versions of the bill, and marked it up in both chambers. We believe we have a bill that is constitutionally viable, and a bill that can be supported by all.”⁴⁰ Akaka continued to support the effort through his waning days in the Senate. After his colleague Daniel Inouye died on December 17, 2012, Akaka again pushed in vain for passage of the bill in honor of his late friend, who had been a major proponent of the legislation.⁴¹

Akaka’s quiet, but constant, service in the Senate guaranteed him wide margins in his first two re-election campaigns; he carried more than 70 percent of the vote in both 1994 and 2000.⁴² In 2006, however, he faced his only



real electoral test since his 1990 special election. Voicing concerns about the age of Hawaii's two Senators, who were both more than 80 years old at the time, Representative Ed Case challenged Senator Akaka in the Democratic primary. "We have to think how we will move on, we want to have control how we move forward," Case said in his announcement, setting himself up as the vanguard of Hawaii's next generation of leaders. He also claimed a more moderate voting record than Akaka.

The rest of Hawaii's Democrats were unprepared for the announcement, and Inouye immediately requested that Case withdraw.⁴³ Both the Hawaii and national Democratic establishment shut Case out, but he attracted the support of national business leaders. Despite raising roughly three times more in campaign donations than Case, Akaka felt threatened, as polls showed a surprisingly tight race. He spent the entire month leading up to the primary campaigning in Hawaii and focusing on Case's assertion that he would have voted for the 2002 authorization of force against Iraq, which Akaka had voted against.⁴⁴ Akaka survived the primary, garnering 55 percent of the vote. Republicans expected Akaka to be weakened heading into the general election, but Akaka handily defeated opponent Cynthia Thielen in November with 61 percent of the vote.

After the intense primary in 2006, Akaka decided not to run for re-election in 2012. He retired from Congress at the age of 88 and now resides in Pauoa Valley in Honolulu, Hawaii.

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

Library of Congress, Asian Division (Washington, DC). *Oral History*: 2003–2011, 8 linear feet. The collection contains videocassettes, DVDs, photographs, and documents related to an oral history project conducted by the United States Capitol Historical Society to document the service of Asian Americans in Congress. Daniel Akaka is included among the interviewees.

University of Hawaii at Manoa Library, Archives and Manuscripts Department, Hawaii Congressional Papers Collection (Honolulu, HI). *Papers*: 1997–2012, 560 linear feet. The collection reflects Daniel Akaka's service in Congress and includes bill files, subject files, committee materials, staff files, memorabilia, administrative files, and audiovisual materials. The collection is closed.

NOTES

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