Interview
SENATOR DANIEL AKAKA
4/19/06

QUESTION: [INDISTINCT]

AKAKA: (:00:30;08 WS) I am Senator Daniel Kahikina Akaka. Senator … from Hawaii. (00:40;13)

QUESTION: Senator, you graduated from Kamehameha School in 1942. During your time there, was statehood a dream? Was it a debate, a discussion at all during your school years?

AKAKA: (00:56;10 MS) At that time, we were a Territory of Hawaii. And we were a territory since 1900. Uh, when I was at Kamehameha, uh, we had revised our curriculum, uh, we have improved it. Uh, many of the concepts that we were learning were a little different from what we knew at one time. And even the ideas of the future played into our discussions. And I would say that statehood was not … one of the—the discussions. Uh, we spent most of the time talking about territory.

QUESTION: Right.

AKAKA: (01:44;00) Our territory, and how we can use that system in the best way to help the people of Hawaii. And statehood uh, was—I would say it was in the minds of uh, people earlier than we were. Uh, but it wasn't that serious until, I would say, uh, after the war; World War II. (02:06;17)

QUESTION: So the war was pivotal in defining Hawaii as a state?

AKAKA: (02:10;03) I would say so.

QUESTION: M-m.

AKAKA: It was pivotal in the United States.

QUESTION: M-hm.

AKAKA: I would say that uh, World War II transformed the United States and, of course, Hawaii also. And uh, it brought around—about changes that uh, had made our country much greater than it was. And I would also tell you that it raised the level of women in society and the workplace uh, for our country, and women took a more active place. So—so there was a reshaping, a transformation uh, of uh, our country and Hawaii during that time. And for people like me, I served in World War II. And I thank our government for uh, the—the GI Bill of Rights, as we called it, because the money that I received from that was uh, took me through college. And all of us, uh, Senator Dan Inouye, Senator Spark Matsunaga; we all went to school on the GI Bill. And were it not for that bill … I doubt whether I would have gone to college. But

this is part of that transformation. And so when you look at us now, we are in positions in the country that we never dreamt about when we were a territory. But statehood helped to bring this about. (03:43;12)

QUESTION: So you would say that statehood has been of enormous benefit to Hawaii and to the people here?

AKAKA: (03:50;22) My feeling is, it has been beneficial to Hawaii. It put Hawaii at the table in our country with other states. We're one of the fifty states of the United States of America. And we receive the uh, the benefits from uh, the United States as other states do. As a matter of fact, I will tell you that today, Hawaii is rated as number three in receiving funding from the United States; number three in the country as a state. And that's uh, based on per capita. But Hawaii has really benef—benefited from our federal government. (04:34;13)

[INTERRUPTION/GENERAL CONVERSATION]

QUESTION: So do you think statehood was beneficial for Hawaii and for the people of Hawaii?

AKAKA: My feeling is that statehood has been beneficial to Hawaii and to the people of Hawaii. And I say that because it has put the people of Hawaii at the table with other states in the—in this country. Uh, it has given us positions in the government that uh, we've never had before that are very important positions, and positions some people think of as power. And we do have two Senators; we have two presently, two uh, representatives of the United States House. And these are representatives who—who determine what comes to Hawaii, or help determines what comes to Hawaii. And we've been doing that since uh, 1960. And uh, uh, there has been a huge benefit to—to Hawaii and to the people of Hawaii. We've found also that we've been able to take our issues directly to the core of our government, which we couldn't before. We had to go through a Governor, we had to go through—through uh, through Congress. Uh, but we did not have people in positions who—who—who would make that difference.

QUESTION: Any down sides at all? Any down sides to statehood?

AKAKA: Some people feel that uh ,there is a down side uh, to statehood. And those are people who have felt that Hawaii should be a monarchy. For instance, uh, and there are … ma—people of Hawaii who feel that Hawaii should be independent. and would be able to do its own thing.

QUESTION: M-hm.

AKAKA: Um, some people feel that uh, Hawaii should have uh, its own nation. And so people who are … feeling that are—are—are not for statehood. But statehood has served uh, Hawaii, as I said, very well. Programs have come that have served Hawaii, our—our … transportation, our highways, or ports; you name 'em. Without uh, the statehood and the federal government, uh, I don't think we would have progressed as far as we have.

QUESTION: And I'll follow that up by asking; what kind of celebrations—

[GENERAL CONVERSATION]

QUESTION: You were in your mid-thirties when statehood came about. Can you remember where you were and how you felt personally?

AKAKA: When Hawaii was admit—admitted as a state, I was thirty-five years old. I was a teacher at Kamehameha Schools. And … we were jubilant to—to receive that uh, that message. And as you know, Ha—Hawaii uh, celebrated. They are pictures of Bishop Street with people uh, so jubilant there and uh, dancing in the streets. Uh, there was a great feeling of—of jubilance uh, in Hawaii. I uh, remember that my brother uh, Reverend—Doctor Reverend Abraham Akaka, who was pastor of Kawaiahao Church, uh, went to the church and gave what became a famous uh, uh … statehood sermon. And officials from the government uh, went to church at that time to—to listen to the—the sermon. And that sermon sort of set—set the pace for statehood for Hawaii. Uh, s—Hawaii became known as the aloha state.

QUESTION: M-m.

AKAKA: And Brother Abe spoke about aloha and the feeling of aloha. And uh, and that statehood sermon has been placed in the Congressional Records. Uh, so that was one—one thing that happened. Uh, bells were ringing all over the place, uh, uh, Mayor Blaisdell at that time went to church at Kawaiahao uh, uh, to celebrate that. And—and so it—it was uh, a period when the military also were so happy uh, and uh, they celebrated as well. But it was a—a day of jubilance. Um, and following that, of course, we had to quickly uh, meet together and—and uh, write a constitution and all of that that followed uh, and had to elect our uh, Senators. And uh, at that time, we just had one Congressman. Uh, but soon after that, there were two. Um … but all of that happened within uh, in two years. And Hawaii was then on its way as a full-scale uh, state of the United States. But it was uh, a time when um, many changes were starting to—to come about. And so even in—and our young people, and of course, uh, at that time, I was relatively young at thirty-five. Uh, we thought of the future and what may be happening to us, and uh, to our future families as well, uh, as

uh, a state of the United States. And I would say, repeating myself again, that it has been beneficial.

QUESTION: Now, the bill that you have proposed for federal recognition; do you see this as a bill that consolidates statehood, or as something that embellishes, adds onto? How do you think your bill will—or will it affect Hawaii's status as a state?

AKAKA: The so-called Akaka Bill or S147 uh, is a bill that's uh, called uh, the Native Hawaiian Reorganization Act of 2006. And the reason 2006, is every two years we have to—we have to put it back in again. Uh, and … so it's—it's a bill to reorganize the Hawaiians. Now, let me step back and say that—that this bill follows an Apology Bill that I passed in 1993. And the Apology Bill, of course, was based on the overthrow in 1893. And uh, I really looked at a hundred years anniversary as a time when we needed to do this.

QUESTION: M-hm.

AKAKA: And so in about 1990, 1991, I uh … crafted the Apology Bill. And in discussing it with my colleagues in the Senate, I was told I would never be able to pass an Apology Bill, a bill where the United States will apologize, in this case to the Hawaiians. And in a sense, that really drove me; drove me to—to seek that and to do it. And … in a way, I was pleasantly surprised when we did pass it in 1993; the bill was signed by uh, President Clinton. Um … important in the bill, and on purpose, I put a word reconciliation. And that bill told—besides the apology, it would have a reconciliation for the Hawaiians. And the reconciliation for me went back to 1893, when the Hawaiians were o—the Kingdom was overthrown. And so that was in the Apology Bill. So the follow up of that is my present bill, S147. I look upon that as a reconciliation. People have asked me, Why do you have the word reorganization? And that's the reason. For me, it goes all the way back to the Monarchy, a time when the—when the Monarch was—was uh, the Kingdom was—was uh, overthrown, the Hawaiians were dispersed. Different from American Indians is when they had battles that they lost, they still had a chief and they still had their tribes that they could go back to. And Alaskan Natives had their villages to go back to. But Hawaiians didn't have a governance to go back to. So in a way, they've been dispersed since the overthrow. I would tell you that uh, Prince Kuhio Kala—Kalanianaole, who was elected in 1902 as Delegate from Hawaii to Congress, um, was concerned about that, to the point where he—he crafted a Hawaiian Homelands Act, which was eventually passed in 1920. Now, that came about because of the concern about the Hawaiians being dispersed, and to bring them together on—on land uh, that belonged to the Hawaiians.

And so … the Prince saw this as a problem as well. And during that time, there were many Hawaiian organizations that uh, were—were organized to try to bring Hawaiians together. But there was no governance. And so my bill brings that governance about. S147 does several things; one, it brings recognition to the Hawaiians as indigenous peoples of Hawaii. And with that, I'm just asking for parity. American Indians are indigenous to the United States; they are recognized. The Alaskan Natives are indigenous to Alaska; they are recognized. Hawaiians are indigenous to Hawaii; they are not recognized. And so this effort is to bring recognition uh, to the indigenous Hawaiian people.

And secondly, it um … it has a process. It's—it uh, has a process that spells out how this government should be put together; that there should be a governing entity, that there should be a roll of Hawaiians uh, who are certified as Hawaiians. And this is the group uh, that will—will become the governing entity; and this will be the group that will write its or—organic act, which is equivalent to a constitution for that governance. Uh, this is the group that will um, will elect its people to—to head the governing—governing entity. And I will tell you that frequently I'm asked, Well, what do Senator Akaka feel that should happen, uh, and uh, what should come about from the entity? And I've refused to answer this. And the reason is, I tell them that when the entity is formed, the people at that time will determine … self-determination and self-governance. And my feeling, and I feel very confident that uh, my grandchildren will be the ones and uh, the children of that uh, generation will be the leaders. And they will determine what will happen.

And I feel that there is a move among the Hawaiian people to—to uh, bring back their language, to bring back their culture and their heritage. And they are doing this, and the young people are doing this; they're learning Hawaiian. Uh, and—and these are changes that are coming about. Uh, we have now the Merrie Monarch in progress, which is part of this culture. And when you see what's coming back through these dances, it's amazing.

1:19:15

And—and I look upon my bill as one that will bring the people, reorganize the people in a govern—governing entity so that they can come together and—and solidify the—the—the pride uh, of—of culture and heritage. Because I believe that the overthrow really affected them uh, adversely affected the Hawaiian pride all those years. And we want to bring this back.

And that—that the young generation who will be in uh, leading this will make Hawaii a place and a—and a peoples who will be able to—to bring about a mission that's needed in our country. And uh, that's the mission of aloha and a spirit of aloha, where people feel um … that they care about other people, and that they—that they can join together. And as they join together, uh, they—they will work for the—in the best interest of the whole. And that's the aloha spirit. And that's what we—we—we look forward to—to coming back, and real strong. And as it does affect our nation, then it should affect the rest of the world.

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And I say that because this feeling of—and—of Hawaii is known globally. Cause as I travel uh, uh, to many other countries, you know, and when I am introduced, the leaders of those countries turn around and look; they pause. And that tells me that Hawaii has a effect on people. And so I feel Hawaii has a mission for—for mankind. And I'm looking forward to my bill as bringing this together as—as a first step in that direction.

QUESTION: Thank you very much; I agree with you.

QUESTION: When statehood was first proposed, was there—had there been much education done in preparing the people for what statehood would mean for them, and what the effects would be in terms of them politically, economically, and the way that they would be perceived by the rest of the world?

AKAKA: They were discussions. There—there were articles, there were uh, debates even, on this. And there was a huge ... group that were—that was against statehood. So we did have two sides. Uh, one for statehood, and the other against. Uh, the ones that were against it, of course, would—would be those who wanted a monarchy, independence, and—and all of that. Uh, and those who were for it were looking—well, I think it fell more on the business side, um, on uh, progress into technology and—and uh, to have uh, a part in uh, in the United States government. And the feeling that uh, we could progress farther as a state, rather than as a territory. Now, these were debates, and they were really [CLEARS THROAT] heavy debates. Uh [CLEARS THROAT], part of the time it became partisan, and uh, uh, the debates carried over into—into Congress. And let me tell you a story uh, that uh, is not really known. When I was in the House of Representative, and this was ... oh ... in about the year 19 ... 79. Uh, Speaker Tip O'Neil uh, and I had a good relation, and uh, and relationship, and he would always invite me in to talk. And this one time, he invited me into the—this room, into his ceremonial office. And I was surprised to see a former Speaker there, Speaker Albert who was seated there, and an—another one who was John McCormick, and—and Speaker O'Neil. And he introduced me to them. And John McCormick spoke up. Now, he was elderly. And ... my first surprise, he told me, I knew your Prince Kuhio. I served the same time as he was in Congress. And so he described Prince Kuhio to me, you know, and what Prince Kuhio did. Which was really uh, so good. I was so happy to hear all of that. Then he went on to talk about statehood, and told me how ... how statehood was not gonna come about, because of the Speaker of the House, who was Sam Rayburn from Texas at that time. And Sam Rayburn did not want Hawa—Hawaii and Alaska to become states, because he—his thing was noncontiguous; that they were noncontiguous to the United States. And for that reason, he didn't want them to be states. And so he—he ... he stopped any movement towards statehood. Now, at that time, John Burns was

the Delegate from Hawaii to Congress. And uh, he was a Democrat, and he uh, wanted statehood. And he became good friends with LBJ, who became President one day. Um ... and uh ... and as he worked with—with uh, pre—with Johnson, Senator Johnson at that time, who was from Texas, uh, he was able to convince LBJ that we should be a state. So LBJ was the one that talked to Sam Rayburn, who was from Texas, and—and convince Rayburn--and this is a long story—but convince Rayburn to let Hawaii and—and Alaska be states. And ... for—for whatever reason ... Sam Rayburn said okay. So as soon as he said that, it went through committee and uh, it passed the committee, and uh, the resolutions were passed. And so in January 1959, Alaska was put on. Let me tell you another part of that, that uh, uh, McCormick mentioned to me. And he said ... there was a fight on who was to be fifty-ninth—uh, uh, uh, I mean forty-ninth or fiftieth state. And Jack Burns was smart. He said he wanted Hawaii to be fifty. And the reason was that forty-ninth had to come up first; and so Alaska had to come up first. And at that time, Alaska was Democratic, and Hawaii was Republican. And the—the—the Congress was Democratic. So it was more likely that they would let Alaska in first. And Jack Burns' feeling was that if they let Alaska in, they couldn't deny us. And that's exactly what happened. Alaska came in in January 1959, and we came in—we were admitted on uh, August 21, 1959 as a state. And so that story came directly from John McCormick, and I really treasure that.

Unintelligible talk between Merata and another person about interview questions.
Duration: 31 seconds

[GENERAL CONVERSATION]

QUESTION: If the Akaka Bill doesn't pass, what are the plans next, given that that may be a scenario? Is there a fallback situation?

AKAKA: There possibly can be a fallback position. Right now, we are uh, positively looking at passing—passing that—that bill. Um, now, should it not pass, as—as you asked, uh, we will have to look at the situation and look at the reasons why it did not pass and uh, look for other ways of—of trying to help the indigenous people of Hawaii. Of course, if it doesn't passes—pass, it uh, uh, will certainly re—reflect against the indigenous people of Hawaii, not giving them parity with other indigenous peoples, and uh, uh, would uh ... really uh ... uh, not show well for—for the United States and—and the way it—it treats uh, its uh, indigenous peoples. So uh, this is something that we're gonna—we need to look at too. If the—that it doesn't pass, then we'll have to look at other ways of uh, of helping the indigenous peoples of Hawaii.

QUESTION: Is there support for it in the United States promising? Does it look promising, the outcome for the bill being passed?

AKAKA: Yes. Uh, right now, we feel uh, that we can pass it. Uh, we have been working on this now for six years, and have not been able to bring it up on the floor.

QUESTION: M-m.

AKAKA: Uh … there's a good possibility that uh, we uh, we may be up in the next month or so. Uh, but it … it's in the hands of the leader of the Senate, and uh … he will determine that.

QUESTION: Do you think that the way that this state has supported the United States, supported so much, given an example about the way that the whole multiethnic harmonious relationship is carried on in Hawaii, do you think that that as a positive example helps a bill like your bill?

AKAKA: Yes, it—it does. We … in Hawaii um … are considered very diverse.

QUESTION: M-hm.

AKAKA: We're a diverse state of people. And we look upon diversity as a strength. And it really is.

QUESTION: M-hm.

AKAKA: 'Cause we think then of ourselves as a—as a rainbow of people, you know, uh, of different eth—ethnicities. And yet, we bind together, work together in the interest and—and—and uh, uh, work together for the benefit of all.
And so this is the spirit that uh, that Hawaii bears, and uh, it's—it's known. Not known, enough, I feel. But uh, but we need to continue to—to uh, to educate uh, our uh, sister states as well and our country in this. And uh, so—so that they can understand uh, Hawaii and—and uh, h—what Hawaii really means to—to this great country.

QUESTION: Thank you.

[END]