

# Talking Story with Senator Dan Akaka

*Senator Daniel Akaka is in the midst of a campaign for reelection that brought him to Maui recently. While here he agreed to answer questions from REMS about his political plans, Senate career, the effort to pass legislation concerning Native Hawaiians and their relationship with the federal government, votes regarding the War in Iraq, and oil exploration and drilling in the Arctic Natural Wildlife Refuge.*

*By Tom Blackburn-Rodriguez*

**Senator, let's get to the question that is on many people's minds. Why are you running for reelection and what do you hope to accomplish in the Senate if you are returned to Washington, DC?**

Over the past 30 years, I have had the privilege to serve the people of Hawaii and this country in both the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives. Because of my seniority, I am now the Ranking Member (Senior Democrat) of the Veterans Affairs committee as well as on the Subcommittees of the Armed Services, Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs and Energy & Natural Resources Committees.

In these positions I am able to make a difference for the people of Hawaii and the nation in key areas: ensuring quality veterans health care, services and benefits; providing our brave men and women in the armed forces with the equipment and training they need to ensure their safety while they defend our nation; improving the federal contracting process by ensuring accountability and transparency; preserving non-homeland security functions that reside in the Department of Homeland Security; developing renewable and alternative energy sources in our state and nation; addressing water shortages; ensuring adequate funding for education programs, including No Child Left Behind; protecting collective bargaining and appeal rights of federal employees; increasing financial and economic literacy in Hawaii and across the country; and formally extending the federal policy of self-governance and self-determination to Native Hawaiians, Hawaii's indigenous peoples.

**One of your major efforts for the past few years has to gain passage of the "AKAKA Bill" that you say is an effort to protect programs targeted toward Native Hawaiians. How will the bill do that? What are the current chances of passage and how do you respond to people who make the charge that the bill discriminates against non-Hawaiians?**

I introduced S. 147, commonly referred to as the Akaka bill, to formalize the existing legal and political relationship between Native Hawaiians and the United States. Congress has historically treated Native Hawaiians in a manner similar to American Indians. This bill formalizes the policies, providing parity in federal policies towards indigenous peoples in the U.S.

The bill has the added benefit of helping to safeguard current federal programs by formally extending the federal policy of self-governance and self-determination to Native Hawaiians. This is a federal policy created by President Nixon, which recognizes a government-to-government relationship between native peoples and the United States. A government-to-government relationship between a Native Hawaiian governing entity and the United States strengthens the legal position of Native Hawaiians in light of those who argue that Native Hawaiians are not "native enough" to be covered by the Indian Commerce Clause.

I am working with Majority Leader Frist to finalize details on the Senate's consideration of this bill. I am confident that I have the votes to pass this bill. The bill does not discriminate against Native Hawaiians. Despite the misinformation spread by opponents, the bill does not transfer lands, the bill does not provide for gaming, and the bill does not affect any private lands. Rather, the bill provides federal recognition of Native Hawaiians as Hawaii's indigenous peoples. The bill benefits all people of Hawaii because it includes a structured process to deal with the longstanding issues from the overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawaii.

For far too long, we have ignored these issues about lands, natural resources, and rights, which have fostered misunderstanding and anger. The bill provides a negotiations process between the Native Hawaiian governing entity, State of Hawaii and United States to address these matters. This is an inclusive, democratic process, which I believe will serve to unite the people of Hawaii and help us to move past our tragic history together, as a state.



Senator Akaka has been in public life for 30 years and is now the Ranking Member (Senior Democrat) of the Veterans Affairs committee and on the Subcommittees of the Armed Services, Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs and Energy & Natural Resources Committees.

**In addition to the Akaka Bill, can you describe briefly some of the other legislative accomplishments you have been involved in since being elected to the Senate?**

My Senate accomplishments are considerable, not to mention my accomplishments from serving in the House. Allow me to list some of the highlights. I authored the Native American Veterans Home Loan Program in 1992 to provide Native American veterans residing on trust lands with direct loans to build or purchase homes on such lands. In 1993, the 100th anniversary of the overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawaii, I passed my resolution allowing the U.S. to officially apologize to Native Hawaiians and commit to a process of reconciliation with Hawaii's indigenous peoples.

Through legislative and administrative means, I enabled military intelligence, Asian American, and Pacific Islander veterans to receive military awards, which were withheld unjustly, and in 1995, my efforts resulted in President Clinton awarding the Medal of Honor—our country's highest award for valor—to 22 Asian American and Pacific Islander World War II veterans. I provided the State of Hawaii with certain preferences during a drawdown of the Strategic Petroleum Reserve. In 1998 through 2003, my legislation allowed expansion of

Hawaii's national parks. In 1999, I increased the Medicare reimbursement rate for Pap smear laboratory tests to ensure that it remains available and reasonably priced for all women.

In 2000, I called for all federal employees to receive pay raises equal to the uniformed services. In 2002, I created the Excellence in Economic Education Act for grades K-12 and successfully fought to obtain appropriations for the program over the last three fiscal years. Last year, I authorized a comprehensive Hawaii energy study, reauthorized programs for alternative fuels including hydrogen and methane hydrates, facilitated the transfer of sugar into ethanol, and secured radioactive waste from terrorists and dirty bombs, all through the Energy Policy Act. Again, these are just the highlights of the various areas in which I have enacted legislative or administrative changes during my years in the Senate, for the people of Hawaii and of this nation.

**You voted against the Iraq War. Do you still agree with that vote and what do you think the United States should be doing now?**

I do not dispute that Saddam Hussein resisted and ignored several UN resolutions calling for Iraqi disarmament of weapons of mass destruction, oppressed the Iraqi people, and



In an election year, no politician can pass up the opportunity to be photographed with children and Senator Akaka is no exception to this rule.

carried out terrible attacks against the Kurds and Shia tribes of Southern Iraq. However, none of these justified going to war.

I believed then, as I do now, that the evidence posed by the Bush Administration was inconclusive. As Chairman of the International Security Subcommittee of the Governmental Affairs Committee, I held comprehensive hearings into Iraq and Saddam's weapons of mass destruction. But the information I learned in those hearings, through classified briefings, and in the Armed Services Committee led me to doubt, first, the immediate threat of Saddam Hussein's purported weapons of mass destruction; secondly, some of the President's allegations about what weapons he had, and, finally, the wisdom of the President's strategy of rushing to war without taking the time to build an international coalition of support both for the battle and in building a lasting peace.

I listened when General Shinseki testified before the Armed Services Committee that we would need 250,000 troops to be successful. Unfortunately Secretary Rumsfeld then replaced General Shinseki. From my in-depth review, I also came to the conclusion that the post-war situation would be even more difficult than the battle for Baghdad itself. We owed it to our brave men and women who would be fighting that battle and then trying to build the peace that they have all the resources they would need to accomplish their mission.

Voting to send someone else's children into battle is the most serious vote a member of Congress can take. Such a vote requires every member to educate himself or herself by searching for every available information—classified and unclassified—and weighing the views of the Administration and of outside experts before casting that fateful vote. I did so. I was one of only 23 members in the Senate to vote against going to war at that time. I regret that I was right in my concerns about Saddam's lack of weapons of mass destruction and about the Administration's lack of a postwar strategy.

The Administration rush to war has now placed us in a deep hole. Getting out of it will be difficult and will require Members of Congress to consider seriously all the information.

Getting out will not be as easy as getting in. Clearly, we must provide the Iraqi people with the tools necessary to stand on their own. That is not an easy task. We cannot want peace more than they can want peace. We cannot want democracy more than they want democracy. They are going to have to build their country themselves. We can train them, we can provide assistance, but we cannot do it all for them. However, this Administration needs to provide guidance, a clear plan of action that specifically illustrates how the United States will assist the Iraqi people to be able to control their own destiny. The next few months will be critical.

**Let me turn to a vote that recently generated a lot of comment in Hawaii, and that is your vote to open up the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) to oil exploration and drilling. Why did you cast that vote and why did you think it was important for Hawaii?**

My vote on ANWR is a vote in support of Alaska's indigenous peoples, the Alaska Natives. My position is based on my experiences in Alaska when I visited the village of Kaktovik in 1995 and spoke to the Inupiat peoples who greatly desire this opportunity for economic self-determination. My position is not new—I have remained firm in the position for the last 11 years. In developing this position I have met with individuals and organizations that have advocated on both sides of this issue. For me, this vote is not a vote just about preservation of the environment versus development. It is a vote about the self-determination of an indigenous people and their homeland—similar to what I am trying to do in the Senate with my bill S. 147 for Native Hawaiians and the people of Hawaii.

The Inupiat, who live within the boundaries of the Alaskan coastal plain, are a people with strong cultural values, and are deeply in touch with their environment and everything that lives there. It is the Inupiat who have been the caretakers of the Arctic region for thousands of years. The Inupiat know every mile, every curve in the landscape of the coastal plain, and every animal that must survive there, for their own survival depends on this. They have the greatest incentive of anyone to preserve their environment, including the plants and animals that live on the coastal plain, in order to maintain their way of life. They too depend on the caribou and their experience has demonstrated that a careful balance is possible, and that preservation and development are not mutually exclusive.

I do not live on the coastal plain. For that reason, I trust the wisdom and knowledge of those who have lived and cared for the land there for many, many generations. I will vote to provide the Inupiat with the opportunity to provide for themselves and their future generations. They have spoken



Senator Akaka is surrounded by prominent community leaders, including May Fujiwara (left, front row) and Gladys Baisa (center). For Akaka public service is about helping to “steer the right course for your children, grandchildren, and generations to come, by ensuring that they can look forward to a bright future.

and have been steadfast in their position for many, many years. I am confident that they will protect their homeland and utilize its resources with the native values that have served them well since time began. Their position is supported by the Alaska Federation of Natives, which represents 110,000 Alaska Natives, and the Native Village of Kaktovic.

**In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and with a new hurricane season approaching, in your view is the U.S. better prepared now than before Katrina? If not, what do we still have to do and why aren't we better prepared?**

We recently completed more than 20 hearings on the federal and state response to Hurricane Katrina in my Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee. Although we now know much of what went wrong in the handling of that catastrophic disaster, it is clear that until each state and the nation has a comprehensive, coordinated response in place, we cannot ensure the safety and security of our citizens and infrastructure in the face of natural or man-made disasters. This is especially critical for Hawaii, which is 2500 miles from the Mainland and has no contiguous states on which to rely

upon in the event of disaster.

That's why, in my meetings with Homeland Security Secretary Chertoff, I have insisted that regional DHS offices are the best way to ensure coordination. It appears that the Department will be proposing a regional office structure, and I look forward to reviewing the proposal. It is also the reason that I have fought to get more support for our first responder community. Most importantly, I have insisted that the Department of Homeland Security take an all-hazards approach to preparing and coping with disasters, both natural and man-made. Nature can often be the source of the greatest terror and threat to our lives and our livelihood.

**As a follow-up—in terms of Homeland security, what did you think of the recent proposal to have the United Arab Emigrates (UAE) operate major U.S. ports? After all, they are a strong U.S. supporter in the Arab world.**

It was unfortunate that the Administration did not take the proper steps to review the investment by Dubai Ports World in American ports. If all the interested departments and agencies, including intelligence and defense, had reviewed carefully the



Cesar Gaxiola (right) and his wife Kimi join with Senator Akaka at the opening of his campaign headquarters at the Maui Mall in Kahului.

proposal and the Treasury's Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) had done its job, this controversy might not have arisen. For that reason I joined Republican Senator Susan Collins of Maine in introducing S. 2400 which would create a Committee for Secure Commerce in the Department of Homeland Security and require agencies, such as the Director of National Intelligence, be part of the review process, that any investment by a foreign company owned by a foreign government be investigated, and that the Congress be fully informed. Foreign investment is not by itself bad but we need to be certain that investment by foreign companies, especially if owned by foreign governments, in businesses critical to our national security is not going to harm our security.

**Now a completely local question—traffic on Maui is becoming a major problem, with West Maui on the front burner right now. Would you support specific federal funding to move the Honoapiilani Highway that goes to West Maui away from the ocean where parts are falling into the water and build a new four-lane highway?**

I am quite aware of the problem that exists in the area you reference. I worked with Senator Inouye to authorize funding to support state and local requests for federal transportation resources to realign Honoapiilani Highway. We included \$12.4 million for this purpose in the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU), which was signed into law last year. We will

now work to secure that amount in the appropriations process to help deliver needed transportation improvements to a vital part of the Island of Maui. However, the specific route will need to be worked out by the appropriate state and county officials.

**Finally, looking back over your public career, what would you say to a young person who was uncertain about entering a career of public service? Any advice you might want to offer based on your own experience?**

Many people may not know that, prior to my entering public service, I was on a clear pathway in education with my highest aspiration to become Superintendent of Education. My desire then was then—as it is now—to help people, and this brought me out of education and into public service—the ability to help even more people to better their lives and the lives of others.

I firmly believe that public servants are the backbone of this nation. They play an important part in leading your country, your state. They help to steer the right course for your children, grandchildren, and generations to come, by ensuring that they can look forward to a bright future. **REMS**

*This article is one in a series of periodic articles highlighting leaders whose decisions affect Maui County. Previous articles in this series have included Councilmembers Charmaine Tavares and Dain Kane, Mayor Alan Arakawa, Representative Ed Case, Governor Linda Lingle, Masaru "Pundy" Yokouchi, Senator Daniel K. Inouye, AARP President Marie Smith and Maui Land & Pineapple President and CEO David Cole.*