

**Interview with Daniel Inouye  
March 3, 2008  
Interviewer, Ronald Sarasin**

***Introduction by Ronald Sarasin, President of the United States Capitol Historical Society***

Welcome to the latest interview in the United States Capitol Historical Society's series of oral history interviews. My name is Ron Sarasin; I'm a Former Member of Congress from Connecticut and the President of the United States Capitol Historical Society.

This interview with Senator Daniel Inouye is part of a special series featuring Asian Pacific American Members of Congress. In these interviews, Current and Former Members have relived their memories of people, places, and events that have shaped their public careers. It is our hope that these recollections will provide listeners with a deeper appreciation for the human dimension of representative government in this temple of liberty we know as the United States Capitol.

Senator Daniel K. Inouye was born in Honolulu, Hawaii on September 7, 1924, and was named after a Methodist minister who had adopted his mother. In March 1943, he enlisted in the U.S. Army's 442nd Regimental Combat Team, the famed "Go for Broke" regiment. He saw combat in Italy and Southern France and was badly wounded during a during an engagement for which he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, which was later upgraded to the Medal of Honor; our highest award for military valor.

With financial assistance from the G.I. Bill, Inouye graduated from the University of Hawaii and the George Washington University Law School. When Hawaii became a state on August 21, 1959, Daniel Inouye won election to the United States House of Representatives as the new state's first Congressman. Elected to the United States Senate in 1962, he is currently serving his eighth consecutive term in the Senate.

**Ron Sarasin:** In our earlier interviews in this series other people we have spoken to have talked about the first time they were sworn in as a Member of Congress and in 1959 you became the first Member from Hawaii. What was that like when you were first on the floor of the House of Representatives?

**Senator Inouye:** Well I had spent some time in Washington before this, as you know, I went to law school, but I had never been on the floor of the chamber. And so, it was an awesome experience for me to be among a multitude of giants, and to have the Speaker of the House swear me in. It was a simple ceremony but I'll never forget it.

**Ron Sarasin:** I can imagine. When many Members come to Washington, they manage to find a mentor, a senior Member who seems to take them under their wing and help them. Was there anyone you looked to at that time, or anyone who kind of looked after you in the early days?

**Senator Inouye:** Well, there were several. One was Leo O'Brien (D-NY, 1952-67), who was a chairman of the subcommittee on territories, the committee that had jurisdiction over statehood. And Congressman Wayne Aspinall of Colorado (D-CO, 1949-73), who was the chairman of the full committee, the Interior Committee, and those two on day one took over, and told me what to do and what to get and what to buy. And the third person, that's the most astounding as far as I'm concerned, was the Speaker of the House (Sam Rayburn, D-TX). For example, on my first day, I found myself in my office all by myself with just furnishings, nothing on the wall, and the telephone rang and it was the Speaker. And he said if you're free come on over, and I didn't know where the Speaker's office was, but, on August now, it was a hot day, I didn't know there was a subway, I ran across the ground, I finally made it up the steps, but I learned after that I used the tunnel, and I got to see him. And believe it or not the Speaker gave me a tour of the Capitol. He was a tour guide. He showed me the shoe shine boy and he says you know you pay him 25 cents but if you can afford it give him a tip, this is the barbershop, this is the bank, and then he took me on the floor and he said that's where I sit and that's where you'll sit and someday you'll sit there by the Chairman's place. And then, I am addressed Mr. Speaker and I'll just address you Gentleman from Hawaii because I'll be damned if

I'm going to call you by your name since I can't pronounce it. And we got to be good friends. He invited me to the Texas table because we had no table, Hawaii table, in the dining room. The Chicago fellas, and the Pennsylvania fellas, and the New York fellas were all good to me.

**Ron Sarasin:** Like your colleagues Senator Dan Akaka and former Congressman and Transportation Secretary Norm Mineta, World War Two was an important event in their lives, and in your life as well. You served in the most highly decorated unit in the history of the United States Army and received the Bronze Star, the Distinguished Service Cross, and the Medal of Honor. Can you tell us what you learned from that experience? And how did that experience impact your public career?

**Senator Inouye:** Well there are certain things that haunt me, even to this day, and that is the realization that War can change a person's character and personality. One might be content in saying I'm a good person. You know, for example, one week before I got into the service and put on my uniform, I was a Sunday school teacher. And I sang in the choir, and my mother was a devout Methodist; Women's Christian Temperance Union, you don't get any more devout than that. And the whole family was that way. And then after training, and going over seas, I recall killing the first German. And the thing that haunts me is that I was jubilant, I was proud. And the fellas around me patted me on the back and said terrific Dan, terrific. And I just killed a human being, and to think that war can change a person so drastically has been with me all the time. So, when it comes to going into war, I am very cautious here. For example, I voted against giving the President the authorization to make a pre-emptive strike on Iraq, because I didn't think it was a war that was fully justified, and it was not a war that we were prepared for. So, this haunted me throughout my life.

**Ron Sarasin:** Let's talk about how you got involved in politics and in public service. When did you decide to enter public service? And had your previous experiences and education prepared you for that?

**Senator Inouye:** Well, I, as a young boy, I shattered my arm; compound fracture, and I was deeply impressed by the orthopedic

surgeon who fixed me up, and from then on I decided that my goal in life was to become someone like him, an orthopedic surgeon, not just a surgeon, but an orthopedic surgeon. And towards that end I studied. When I got into college, the first semester, I went into pre-med. But then I got old enough to volunteer, and when I got to become eighteen, I volunteered. And when I was on my final battle, and when I was wounded and lost my arm, it became apparent that I couldn't be an orthopedic surgeon, although my professors tried to convince me to stay in medicine, in some other field, but I decided something else. And in those days, the military gave you a whole series of examinations, written and otherwise, aptitude tests, and after the whole battery of tests had been completed, the panel concluded that I should be involved in some sort of activity that involved a lot of people. For example, I should either be a teacher, a social worker, a minister, or politician. I checked out teacher and social worker and they were getting paid a hundred twenty five bucks a month in Hawaii, and I said forget that, you can't raise yourself on that. And the ministry I felt was not for me, because I sin too much, although my mother thought I'd be fabulous. And that left political activity, and I must confess I knew zilch about politics; I didn't care for it at that time. But I took a look at it, and when I got into the hospital in Michigan, one of the fellas I met there was Bob Dole (Robert Dole, R-KS, US Representative, 1961-68; US Senator, 1969-96) and we became good friends, even to this day. And when I asked him, what are your plans, and he without hesitating said, I'm going to be a county clerk, after that I'm going to run for the State House, first opening in the Congress that's where I'm going. I figured that's a good idea. So I went to law school, I became Assistant Prosecutor, and when the territorial office became available I ran for that office, and then statehood came along, I got to Congress, a little ahead of Bob.

**Ron Sarasin:** The, now you were in the territorial legislature then before you came, before you came here?

**Senator Inouye:** I was there two terms in the House, and part of a term in the Senate.

**Ron Sarasin:** And then came here as a Member of the House and at that time, who did you come here with at that time?

**Senator Inouye:** The House had one Member.

**Ron Sarasin:** One Member, only one Member at that time. You mentioned Senator Dole, and the fact that you had been in the hospital with him in Michigan. It's amazing that some of these friendships were formed long before any public service, either one of you, Norm Mineta talks about being a friend of, excuse me, the Senator from Wyoming Al Simpson, and meeting him when he was a boy scout, together, and you have a relationship with Bob Dole.

**Senator Inouye:** The other one is Phil Hart (Sen. Philip A. Hart, D-MI, 1959-76), who the building (Hart Senate Office Building) is named after. All three of us were in the hospital at the same time.

**Ron Sarasin:** Oh really.

**Senator Inouye:** And all three became Senators at just around the same time.

**Ron Sarasin:** That is amazing.

**Ron Sarasin:** Now in your Senatorial career, you have certainly accomplished a great deal, and been here a long time. But one of the, or a couple of the, most important Congressional investigations in recent history, have involved you as well. You've been involved in them as one of the investigators in the Watergate Committee and the Iran Contra hearings. You mentioned you had been a Prosecutor before you came to the house. How much has that background, and the service on those committees formed your thoughts regarding public service and the country?

**Senator Inouye:** Well, my service as assistant prosecutor didn't mean that much. One thing that impressed me was that in this land, no one is above the law. In other places, if you are the King, or the Emperor, or the Dictator you're above the law; you make the law. But in the United States even the President is subject to the law. And he has to answer for his deeds or misdeeds, and that really impressed me. You read about it in books, but to see it in operation is something else. The other thing that impressed me about these hearings was the awesome power of the media, and television especially. Up until then, I was totally unknown, other than Hawaii,

which is not even one percent of the population. And, but after Watergate, I began receiving not just tens of letters, but hundreds of thousands of letters, and one day Mr. Gallup visited me and he says according to the latest poll the most recognizable person is the President of the United States, and guess who is next to him. He said, "It's you", I said, "How can I be the one?", and he said, "Well you look different." But, the media can be powerful.

**Ron Sarasin:** One of the important issues facing the nation today is balancing the need for national security, while protecting civil rights, and maintaining the freedom that our nation cherishes. What's your perspective on our current situation?

**Senator Inouye:** Maintaining security, and maintaining our freedoms is absolutely essential, that's true. But to do that at the expense of destroying our human rights and civil rights is not acceptable. I would say that if a matter is so severe that we are on the verge of war, then the people should be aware that certain things are going to happen, and are happening. If we are going to tap telephones, I think the people of the United States should be made aware who we are tapping, and why we are tapping it. It shouldn't be done in the cover of darkness.

**Ron Sarasin:** You were first elected to represent Hawaii in the house, and then you've been in the Senate now since 1963. And of your many legislative accomplishments, a couple were the native Hawaiian education act, and the native Hawaiian healthcare act. Tell us about those, and why they were most important to you?

**Senator Inouye:** Well, I suppose it goes back to my mother, because my mother was an orphan at the age of four. Her parents were plantation workers and were gone, and at that moment there was no social services in the territory of Hawaii and she was literally out on the streets, and along came a young Hawaiian couple who took her hand and took her home. That's the way they do it: "*hana'i*"--they adopted her. And she lived with them as a happy child for a year, and she never forgot that. And she always reminded me what a gentle people, compassionate people these Hawaiians are; but as a result they have been exploited, taken advantage of, and so she says you must do your best to protect them. And when I became a

politician, Hawaiians were on the bottom of the social and economic, and political ladder. And I did my best to see that they are provided with the basic necessities of life; education and health over and above what we were providing. They lived in the slums; they lived in the equivalent of reservations, out in the countryside far away from the center of civilization in Hawaii. So we brought medicine, and education out there.

**Ron Sarasin:** In their recent book “The Broken Branch” veteran Congressional scholars Tom Mann and Norm Ornstein argue that increasing partisanship in Congress has undermined both public confidence in the institution, as well as its ability to perform its constitutional role. How would you compare your experience in Congress with Congress today? Have you noticed an increase in partisanship a lack of comity, has that hindered the ability of Congress to legislate? And what do you see as the solution, assuming there is a problem, what do you see as a solution to the problem?

**Senator Inouye:** At times I'd like to describe it as two different worlds. The world that I was introduced to in 1959 was not a partisan world. It was a world in which debates were loud and clear, but after the debates were over, the men would get together for a smoke or a drink, or have dinner together, or visit each other, discuss problems, and you found Democrats with their best friends being Republicans and vice versa, which was very common, something you don't see today. And I have tried my very best to be as nonpartisan as I can be. And today it's no secret, but one of my best buddies is a man from Alaska, he's a Republican, Stevens (Senator Ted Stevens, R-AK, 1967-present) and I like him. We don't agree, and in fact, according to the poll, the record keeping, I think we disagree about seventy percent of the time. But, as we agree upon, if we disagree, let's not be disagreeable. That makes a big difference. When we disagree, yup, we disagree, and we explain as civilly as possible why we do so. But when we agree we work together hand and glove. As a result he and I are on a Congress committee on the defense committee and if you see the production of these committees you can see the difference. We are very productive, in fact the Defense Appropriations bill for the last six years passed unanimously. That's something.

**Ron Sarasin:** You know I have a theory about that as well. It's almost as if people get elected today thinking that they are supposed to dislike the person on the other side of the aisle.

**Senator Inouye:** Unfortunately, yes.

**Ron Sarasin:** And they don't even know them. And I agree the idea of yelling and screaming and fighting for principle, and then going to dinner is a time honored tradition which has really disappeared. And I have to agree, that's unfortunate.

**Senator Inouye:** You should also remember that this is a land of immigrants. It's not Europe, it's not Asia, it's not Africa but it's a combination of all. The only so called natives were the Indians. The rest of us were foreigners, and sometimes we forget that.

**Ron Sarasin:** What do you see as a solution to this problem? Is there a solution?

**Senator Inouye:** I think those of us who get older should make an extra effort to demonstrate what non-partisanship can result in. I've tried to do that in my regular work so when my colleagues see, you can see all these things happening, and those who serve on our committees get the message.

**Ron Sarasin:** Well with your committees especially, and with your relationship with Ted Stevens as the politics have changed here over the years and Democrats are in control at one time and Republicans the next. It has never seemed to make that much of a difference on your committee as far as the ability to produce great results because you've worked together.

**Senator Inouye:** The other rule that I follow, if an incumbent Republican is running, I avoid going to that state. Because if you go into that state and say nasty things about him, he won't forget it when he gets back.

**Ron Sarasin:** Senator, you were in the territorial legislature when Hawaii was about to become a state, and decided to run for Congress. What helped to prompt that decision? And what was that



campaign like in an area that had never experienced a campaign like that before?

**Senator Inouye:** Well to be first in anything is a great experience. Because you are the pioneer and you don't know what the rules are. My first campaign, this may shock you, cost fifteen thousand dollars for Congress, and this was the inaugural campaign for statehood. I had a budget of ten thousand dollars, with about four thousand grassroots workers, and I got a contribution totaling five thousand dollars and I was astounded that people would contribute such big sums, but I accepted them, and we ran on a budget of fifteen thousand. My campaign for the Senate cost me sixty thousand the first time, I won't tell you what my opponent spent, but he spent many, many, many times more than I did. When Hawaii became a state the party leaders suggested that I should run for the Senate, which I did, and then about two weeks later, two elder statesmen, elders of the party, decided to run. One was a very distinguished judge, and member of the legal fraternity, and the other had served as Governor, Lieutenant Governor, social services director, education director, and so I withdrew. Because that's the way I was brought up, to respect my elders, and they noted that so the man who was elected for the short term said I will finish this term and I'll retire, and retire in favor of Inouye. And he told the people to vote for me, and I ran for the Senate in '62 and here I am.

**Ron Sarasin:** And at that time of course, as you mentioned earlier, the state of Hawaii had one congressman. So running for the Senate was not a different area for you, everyone knew who you were.

**Senator Inouye:** It's the same area.

**Ron Sarasin:** It's the same area. Was it difficult at that time, in the earlier days of statehood, to run from the several islands in Hawaii?

**Senator Inouye:** It was much more interesting, because today, you can literally stay in Honolulu and campaign because you have television and radio and you have DVDs that you can send around the place. I would rather go to these little islands and campaign in the villages and townships. That to me was exciting. And I still do my best, and when the time permits, to go to these places. Now in

about three weeks I'm going back to Hawaii, and at that time this trip, I visited the island of Kawai, a small island, and Nihau. Nihau is a privately owned island but there are people there who are my constituents and I wanted to see them, and report to them what's happening here. I realize that I could make more hay in some school auditorium in Honolulu, meeting more than a thousand people, more than Nihau meeting two hundred, but I get my kicks out of that.

**Ron Sarasin:** Our final question is the legacy question. Over and above the things you have accomplished, or are yet to accomplish, how would you like to be remembered?

**Senator Inouye:** This may sound foolish but I just want people to know that I tried my best.

**Ron Sarasin:** Can't ask for anything more than that. Senator, thank you very, very much, we really appreciate you giving us your time today.