

Dan Inouye

U.S. SENATOR FROM HAWAII



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By U.S. Senator Daniel K. Inouye, J.D. '52

A week ago, I spent four hours watching the first four chapters of HBO's special documentary on John Adams. I did this to remind myself of the pain, anxiety, and sacrifices that our founding fathers had to endure for an idea. For this idea, they were willing to give up their lives, their families, and their fortunes.

They were told by the powerful king of one of the then most powerful nations of the world, Great Britain, that they would be hanged by their necks to their death if they followed their intended course. Yet they proceeded.

I was mesmerized by the scene of Adams, Jefferson, and Franklin debating the text of the Declaration of Independence. This Declaration with its key sentence of 35 words has been an important part of my life since my early youth. I have found myself thinking of those 35 words in my mind during difficult moments of decision-making: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."

Our founding fathers adopted the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, knowing very well that to do so meant immediate death upon capture, the destruction of their families, and the confiscation of their properties. But they did so.

They bravely took to heart their Declaration, knowing it could not be realistically

applied at that moment. This was a long-term problem that would take generations. After adopting the Declaration, ironically, these historic figures left Philadelphia to return to their homes, their farms, and their shops, and they were greeted and served by their African slaves upon their return.

In their hearts of hearts, our founding fathers knew that slavery was wrong. But they were also sadly aware that the people of this new land were not quite ready to accept slaves as persons who were created equally.

The 35 words that comprise the heart of the Declaration of Independence have been read, re-read, tested, condemned, and acclaimed. Nearly 80 years after the founding of our nation, these 35 words were once again put to an important test. It was a test that culminated in the War Between the States, a war in which so many thousands – for both the Union and Confederacy – gave their lives for their beliefs.

Then nearly eight decades later, these 35 words were once again attacked and put to the test. The time was World War II, and I was part of that World War II generation. Two weeks after December 7, 1941, a regulation by our government proclaimed that my father, who had traveled with his parents at the age of 3 to a Hawaii plantation; my mother, who was born in a Hawaii plantation village and whose parents toiled in plantation fields; together with my sister, two brothers, and countless cousins, were declared to be among those unfit to be Americans.

Moreover, some of our friends and cousins who lived on the West Coast of the United States were given 24-hour notice to abandon their homes and farms. They were told to take only their belongings that they could carry with them. They were sent to 10 desolate, far-off places, where they were confined in camps ringed by barbed wire and guard towers whose guns pointed inward. Our government called these facilities concentration camps. Approximately 120,000 Japanese Americans spent part of their lives there, and some remained there until the end of World War II. From these camps, hundreds of Japanese Americans volunteered to fight and die for their country, which had incarcerated them without cause, and for only one reason: that they shared the ancestry of our enemies, the Japanese.

For Japanese Americans, our official designation was 3-F – enemy alien. For many of us, the impact of that label was personal, and an affront to our patriotism. We felt we had to demonstrate our loyalty and Americanism to the land of our birth.

We petitioned the government to let us volunteer, and enter into combat with the enemy – even if it meant fighting our cousins in Japan. Eventually, we were allowed

to serve in a segregated unit. This unit has the distinction of being the most decorated unit of its size in the history of the U.S. Army.

To the glory of our country, 43 years after the end of World War II, our nation, by legislative and presidential approval, acknowledged the wrong that was committed to this segment of its citizenry during the early days of the conflict, and formally apologized. What other nation would have done that – admit a wrongful act?

It was a proud moment in my life to have our nation find the courage to admit to a wrong and apologize.

In less than a generation after World War II, the heart of the Declaration of Independence – those key 35 words – were again put to a test. It was a test in which our nation saw bloody demonstrations in the streets. People were killed, and cities were torched. Even our beloved leaders were assassinated. But we passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and in doing so we acknowledged that those 35 words were not only important, but correct.

I believe those words are once again being tested. And they are being tested both at home and abroad.

In our land of democracy, equality, and plenty, there are millions of citizens who cannot afford health care, and our economy is faltering for a growing number of Americans. The increasing cost of gas puts a crunch on family budgets. Far from home, we are once again involved in an unpopular war, a war that is seemingly opposed by much of the young men and women of our nation. These challenges at home and abroad make it very difficult to bring the people of our nation together.

But, members of the Class of 2008, it will be you and your generation that will carry the flag through this time of challenge. You will have the opportunity to take those 35 words, and make them more of a reality for our fellow citizens.

I know that at my age, I do not have many years left to fight the good fight. So I envy you. You have the opportunity to step forward, and take some important steps to advance the words of Adams, Jefferson, Franklin, Washington, and our other founding fathers. I hope some of you will seriously consider public service. Through you, we can make life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness much more of a reality.

As you and your generation take your first steps forward to positions of leadership

and influence, we are at a moment in history when we could soon have a president of African American heritage. And it wasn't many years ago when racial discrimination was still legal, even though the Civil War ended slavery. Racism is still alive, but we are moving forward.

I still remember from my law school days of learning of the grief of a GW Ph.D. faculty member – a white woman – who was married to an American Samoan who held a Ph.D. They could not live in Virginia because of that state's miscegenation law. Today, miscegenation laws are unconstitutional and banned. Another sign of progress.

And we also have the possibility of having a woman as president. It was only 88 years ago that American women gained, through legislative and presidential action, the right to vote. This is a significant step forward.

We also have a man in the presidential race who wore our nation's uniform. He served our country, and his service included five-and-a-half torturous years in a dungeon in Hanoi. His service reflected a commitment to those important 35 words of the Declaration of Independence.

To the Class of 2008, I congratulate you for your hard work that has led to this special moment. Savor it.

I wish all of you well. I also wish you will always hold close to your heart that document that defines our great nation, and its most important 35 words: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."

God bless you, and God bless America.