



DANIEL K. INOUE
INSTITUTE

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A Democrat to Watch by George Will

Washington today seems composed in approximately equal proportions of Democrats disoriented by defeat, Republicans disoriented by victory and journalists disoriented as usual. In a town that should by now be used to four-year eras, there is much talk about the long-term decline of the Democratic Party and about a Republican era. But in a temperate society, history has a way of moderating its movements. Strong political winds often scatter seeds of countervailing forces. The defeat of prominent Democrats who defined their party in the 1970s has opened the way to prominence for a different kind of Democrat. If this new kind (which is really an old kind) had been more prominent in the 1970s, the party would not have earned a thrashing. And if this new kind of Democrat regains control of the party, it may quickly recover. One of the most formidable of this kind is Daniel Inouye.

He became a congressman in 1959, when Hawaii became a state. He went for his freshman audience with the Speaker, Sam Rayburn of Texas, who gave Inouye a tour of the House, delivered his famous lecture on getting along by going along and then said: Soon you will be, next to me, the best-known person in the House. When Inouye, perplexed, demurred, Rayburn explained: There are not too many one-armed Japanese in Congress.

Inouye has just been elected to his fourth Senate term. He won with 81 per cent, down from 83 per cent in 1974. The trend is clear, he says dryly. Yes, at that rate of decline he will lose in the year 2076.

Worth Reading: Some senators are closed books you have no desire to open; others are open books always reading themselves to you. Inouye is well worth reading, but, not being a self-advertiser, he is not as well known as he should be. As a result of the upheaval of Nov. 4, he now is twelfth in Senate seniority. If ambition digs in its spurs, he may become a leading actor in this decades political drama.

Hawaii is the most Democratic state. It voted for Carter even though he conceded before 5:00

p.m., Hawaii time. But until the early 1950s Hawaii was utterly Republican. The change began with the GI Bill of Rights, which opened the way to college, and hence politics, for young Japanese-Americans. Inouye says Hawaii usually has proportionately more men in military service than any other state. After Pearl Harbor, a Japanese-American regiment was formed by men who felt they had something to prove, and they proved to be extraordinary soldiers. Inouye was wounded three times in Europe, the last time (which cost him his arm) two days before the shooting stopped. A few more Inouyes (Distinguished Service Cross, Bronze Star, Good Conduct Medal, five unit citations, five battle stars) and the war would have been over sooner.

Inouye, a youthful-looking 56, is compact and controlled. Talking to him is like talking to a triumph of micro-chip electronics. He is the least ruffled spirit in Washington, measuring his words, impatient with imprecision and waste motion. Some Democratic senators are so bitter about their fall from majority status that they say they would rather be saboteurs than statesmen. Inouye rightly notes that such was, until a few years ago, the Republican vice. Democrats could, he says, sharpen our parliamentary knives just to show cleverness, but the road back is in sharpening our minds with new programs.

Some Democrats who are rightly impressed by the effectiveness of the national Republican Party's television advertising for Congressional candidates, are wrongly convinced that salvation lies in such electoral mechanics -- more money, better commercials. What they are ignoring, says Inouye, is that in the last four years Republicans developed a program to sell, and, under Howard Baker, became a convincing, because cohesive, force.

But before Senate Democrats can act as Republicans acted, they need a Baker. Their current leader, Robert Byrd of West Virginia, became leader through meticulous attention to trivia, to the little favors and courtesies (such as scheduling debates to accommodate travel plans) that a sufficiently diligent man, dealing with sufficiently complacent colleagues, can translate into political capital. He has been considered a satisfactory leader because he is his party's ablest mechanic regarding parliamentary machinery. That seemed sufficient when Democrats were a large, self-indulgent majority. When Democrats seek a more magnetic and disciplining leader, Inouye's eligibility will be conspicuous.

Greatest Party: The Democratic Party is not only the world's oldest, it is, because of its shaping role in the greatest nation of the modern age, the world's greatest party. But in the 1970s Democrats were not comfortable with one another because many of the most prominent Democrats -- Carter, Church, Kennedy, McGovern and Mondale to cite just five --

were uncomfortable with their party's record of strong defense and strongly anti-Communist policies under Truman, Kennedy, Johnson and Congressional leaders like Rayburn.

To talk with Inouye, whose political pedigree traces to Rayburn, is to sense the Democratic Party's substantial remaining resources of sobriety. Young Congressman Inouye developed a close relationship with Rayburn, perhaps in part because he had been named an honorary Texan. (The Japanese-American regiment was part of the Texas Division, and suffered horrendous casualties in an eight-day fight to relieve an embattled Texas battalion in France.) Bismarck said that every man has his basic worth, from which must be subtracted his vanity. Inouye is less diminished by such subtraction than senators usually are. Perhaps that is because, as big men do, he measures himself against big men, like Rayburn. Or perhaps because, years ago, in France and Italy, he acquired an antidote to vanity: earned pride.

In any case, he is the sort of man who can rehabilitate the Democratic Party. Republicans who see him as a threat, should. But they also should think as citizens; should be thankful he is on hand; should remember that Democrats will govern again. The life of the nation is long, the life of an era is short.

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