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**Statement from Director Kevin Gover on the Passing of
U.S. Senator Daniel Inouye, 1924-2012**



We at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian feel a deep loss with the death of Senator Daniel K. Inouye. Inouye presided over the grand opening of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C. Sept. 21, 2004. He said, “Somehow, I have the feeling that the ancient gods were looking down on us, and all the stars came to their rightful places in the firmament.”

Fifteen years earlier, Inouye introduced S. 978, a bill to establish the National Museum of the American Indian. Three key experiences moved Senator Inouye to write this legislation. One was his realization that in this city of monuments, not a single statue or marker honored the First Americans. He was then overwhelmed by the sheer quantity—more than 800,000 items—of Indian cultural materials amassed by a 20th-century private collector containing everything from Peruvian gold to the standard of Sitting Bull, and was distressed by the fact that the collection was deteriorating. And finally, he saw the neatly arranged boxes containing more than 18,500 Native American human remains taken from battlefields and desecrated graves that had come into the possession of the Smithsonian Institution. He remarked, “Here, long after the end of the Indian wars, the First People of our land were still being maligned and mistreated, and like any other American, my reaction was that something had to be done.” And the good senator did something. He introduced his legislation and persuaded his colleagues in Congress to pass the bill that established the National Museum of the American Indian.

In 2014, the only national museum dedicated to Native Americans will celebrate the 25th anniversary of its founding legislation. We are deeply saddened at Senator Inouye's death, of course. But in this case, it can truly be said that our sadness is outweighed by our overwhelming gratitude for his life and his works. After the legislation was enacted, Senator Inouye continued to serve the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian as a member of its Board of Trustees from 2001 to 2006. But his service to the Smithsonian and this museum are but a small part of his extraordinary service and contribution to Native people.

Senator Inouye's accomplishments as chairman and vice chairman of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs from 1987 to 2005 included the Native American Graves Protection & Repatriation Act, the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act, the Native Hawaiian Education Act, the Native Hawaiian Health Care Improvement Act, the Indian Health Care Improvement Act and many others. He reinvigorated and made permanent the Senate's Committee on Indian Affairs, giving tribal governments an ongoing forum to express their needs, concerns, ideas and aspirations. He successfully pushed for a formal apology from the federal government for the role of the United States in the ouster of the Hawaiian monarchy in the late 1800s. It is fair to say that no single person in government has done more for American Indians in the past three decades—indeed, perhaps ever—than Senator Inouye. He was a champion acting for the best of reasons: he simply believed it was the right thing to do.

Native Americans hold Senator Inouye in the highest esteem not only for his legislative successes, but also for his heroic feats on the battlefield. Senator Inouye is well known for his distinguished wartime record as a member of the 442nd, known for its motto, "Go for Broke." He suffered grievous wounds while destroying three enemy machine gun nests in Italy, an action for which he won the Distinguished Service Cross, the Bronze Star and the Purple Heart. In 2000, Senator Inouye was one of 22 Asian American veterans belatedly awarded the Medal of Honor—the Nation's highest award for military valor—after a review of their combat records.

Indian Country mourns the death, celebrates the life and gives thanks for the service of this brave and humble man who defended the United States on the battlefields of Europe in World War II and then devoted the rest of his life to ensuring that our Nation lives up to its lofty ideals. Aloha and mahalo, Senator Inouye.

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