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Native Hawaiians, proud citizens

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By Daniel K. Akaka and Neil Abercrombie - The Native Hawaiian Government Reorganization Act, known as the Akaka bill, has been wildly mischaracterized and misinterpreted by The Washington Times and others since the bill's consideration and passage last week by the House of Representatives last week. It was branded a "stunning display of racial divisiveness," and the claim was made that it would "further inflame tenuous race relations nationwide." As the House and Senate sponsors of the legislation, we can assure you that our bill simply allows the federal government to recognize Native Hawaiians as an indigenous people of the United States, very much like Native Americans or Alaska Natives.

It recognizes the historic fact that Native Hawaiians were on their land centuries before anyone from the United States ever came ashore. It recognizes the fact that the Kingdom of Hawaii was recognized as a sovereign nation by the United States more than 175 years ago and accorded full diplomatic relations in treaties and conventions in 1826, 1842, 1849, 1875 and 1887, all ratified by Congress.

In 1893, American business interests — tacitly backed by the U.S. military — illegally overthrew the Hawaiian monarchy. Twenty-eight years later, Congress passed the Hawaiian Homes Commission Act, setting aside more than 200,000 acres for homesteads and farms for Native Hawaiian families. In addition, 1.8 million acres were ceded from the former Hawaiian royal family. It was no accident, but by deliberate action that the United States and people of Hawaii expressly recognized and preserved the rights of its indigenous people in the 1959 Hawaii Admissions Act. By law, a portion of the revenues from the lands, administered by the State of Hawaii, is intended for the betterment of the Native Hawaiian people.

The purpose of the Akaka bill is to allow the Native Hawaiian people to decide on the organization of an entity to represent them in government-to-government relations with the United States. And the State of Hawaii can transfer responsibility for the administration of the land and dollar assets to a Native Hawaiian government. If, as some suggest, this conveys some sort of special privilege to its citizens, it is certainly not apparent.

The Native Hawaiian Government Reorganization Act does not create a program or entitlement. It doesn't require an appropriation. It isn't based on racial groups or set-asides or preferences. It doesn't turn over assets of the U.S. government, nor does it give anyone title to anything they don't already own. It is unfortunate that some who oppose the Native Hawaiian Government Reorganization Act misstate its meaning and effect. It is particularly disappointing that many of the misstatements have come in the name of President Bush and his administration.

The people of Hawaii are not threatened by the prospect of Native Hawaiians

reorganizing a governing entity. Rather, they respect and support efforts to preserve the culture and tradition of Native Hawaiians that make our state so special. It is for this reason that we work to continue the reconciliation efforts the United States committed itself to in 1993, as a means to unify all the people of Hawaii and move forward together as a state.

The Akaka bill doesn't divide Americans. Today's Native Hawaiians are proud citizens of the United States. They work hard. They raise families. They pay taxes. And they have been front and center in the ranks of our military for decades. The Akaka bill passed last week in the House by a 108-vote margin. Supporters included 39 Republicans. Until recently, the measure was never partisan in the House.

We hope it will not be partisan in the Senate. It has never been partisan in Hawaii.

Sen. Daniel K Akaka is a Hawaiian Democrat. Rep. Neil Abercrombie is a Hawaiian Democrat