Destiny over Decency:
The Annexation of Hawaii

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Throughout late-1800s America, the concept of imperialism held great power in the minds of the average citizen. Surely, they believed, it was America’s destiny to expand, to grow, to expose other lesser civilizations to their perfect system of government. At the time, the “white man’s burden” was a common phrase, and Americans took it to heart. Whether it was distant territory in the far north or islands thousands of miles away from their shores, the United States jumped at the chance to incorporate more territory into their fast-growing empire, whether through legal means or not.

On July 12, 1898, the United States government annexed the recently renamed Republic of Hawaii. While the Americans considered this new asset a triumph, justifying their actions through several reasons, this loss of autonomy and culture was a definite tragedy for the native Hawaiians, then and now.

While Polynesian sailors first discovered Hawaii around 400 A.D., British Captain Cook stumbled upon them in 1778, and other Europeans followed, bringing with them agriculture and industry to support their lifestyles. The first American arrivals were missionaries who, upon their landing in the early 1800s, associated themselves with the ali`i, the ruling class of the islands. Although the islands initially entered the sandalwood and whaling industries, cash crops like sugar and pineapple soon proved more profitable. Through this affiliation with the nobility and the resulting marriages, the wealth and influence of these missionaries’ descendants grew.

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By the 1890s, the Kingdom of Hawaii was small but prosperous. The Hawaiian ali’i had long since evolved into a constitutional monarchy, complete with a functioning legislature. The monarch employed a cabinet of ministers to advise him, although these posts were claimed by the ambitious haole, as Hawaiians called their white neighbors. Hawaii retained several political parties³, and citizens could run for office in the Hawaiian legislature and vote for the representatives they wanted.

The Hawaiian monarchs derived their power through several sources. One, continuity through traditional family lines, was unique to the monarchy and gave them legitimacy. The royals also had different types of legal immunity, a common feature in most constitutional governments. The Hawaiian rulers were also beholden to certain restrictions, and it was this aspect that the Hawaiian Americans exploited.⁴

Despite their relatively low population, Hawaii’s white citizens held disproportionate power. Per their strong disapprobation, traditional Hawaiian practices, such as the hula, all but disappeared. They controlled much of the islands’ business and trade and had dominated Hawaii’s economy for decades, justifying their often decadent lifestyles through their Christian faith and their own inner sense of superiority. The most ambitious desired political power as well.

These men considered themselves American citizens, and although some of them lived their entire lives on the islands, by their beliefs they were entitled to the rights of their continental counterparts. As they gained power in Hawaii’s limited business world, they grew increasingly disgruntled at the taxes they were forced to pay for their goods to reach the larger American market.

In 1875, Hawaii’s King Kalakaua approached the United States government and drew up a reciprocity treaty in an effort to please the notorious Hawaiian sugar barons, who had all but monopolized Hawaiian industry and resented the import taxes they had to pay when shipping their product to the mainland. Under this new treaty, the regular import tariffs were dropped, significantly lowering costs for American businessmen operating in Hawaii. Dissatisfied, a group led by Lorrin Thurston, one of Kalakaua’s ministers, coerced the king into signing a particularly limiting constitution. Called the “Bayonet Constitution” by locals, it severely hampered both the king’s power and his native subjects’ voting powers, while securing voting rights for the whites. After signing, Kalakaua could not introduce any new laws without the approval of his white ministers. Originally meant to serve as advisors, these influential men soon became the leaders of the Hawaiian government in all but name.

Nearly fifteen years later, when Kalakaua’s sister and successor, Queen Liliuokalani, attempted to replace the Bayonet Constitution with one of her own making, the Hawaiian

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Americans were alarmed. Sanford Dole, a powerful tycoon, was, according to Neil Proto Thomas, “a man perfectly capable of the expediencies necessary to take by force what was essential for power through guise or pretense.” He had used his position to secure a permanent position as a justice on the Hawaiian Supreme Court. His situation was among those threatened by Liliuokalani’s proposed changes; according to her document, judges would no longer hold their positions for life. As such, he was highly motivated to back the annexationists’ cause and became one of their most prominent members.

With the support of most of her subjects, the headstrong new queen tried to replace her brother’s deeply entrenched ministers and restore her people’s voting rights and her own executive power. At that point, most of Hawaii’s white citizens believed that annexation of Hawaii by the United States was the best way to subdue the natives once and for all and further their business ventures. Members of a self-proclaimed “Committee of Safety” granted themselves the power necessary to overthrow the queen, which they did through a bloodless show of force on January 17, 1893. Backed by an American naval vessel sent by John Stevens, the American Minister to Hawaii, annexationists ran up the American flag and established a provisional government, declaring that the islands were now the Republic of Hawaii. Dole was named its president.

As typical white businessmen and politicians, the annexationists also believed in profit. As Thurston proclaimed in his pamphlet, “Handbook on the Annexation of Hawaii,” American

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tariffs already controlled most of Hawaii’s international trade. Although the Provisional Government controlled the islands for the moment, other countries could still lay claim to them unless they were officially annexed.\textsuperscript{11} Part of this trade enthusiasm was due to the McKinley Tariff, which had been put forth by Senator McKinley in 1890. It taxed all foreign imports, effectively rendering the reciprocity treaty useless. The value of Hawaiian goods plummeted.

Throughout the 19th century, many Americans also believed in “Manifest Destiny”: the idea that America as a nation was meant to expand and grow, extending their influence beyond their borders in order to gain new territory. Having already broadened their country from coast to coast, many reasoned that Hawaii was the next logical step; its strategic value simply sweetened the deal. Thurston concluded that America needed to take certain steps to secure this destiny.

But racism played no small role, either. It was the source of the whites’ original prejudice against the native Hawaiians; not unlike their mainland counterparts’ disregard for the Native Americans and African-Americans. Across the ocean, most Americans were still influenced by the prejudice of the Reconstruction Era, and the attitudes of most public figures set a bad example. After news of the takeover broke, Captain Alfred T. Mahan, a popular author as well as an expert on naval strategy, said, “‘It is a question for the whole civilized world, and not for the United States only, whether the [Hawaiian] Islands, with their geographical and military importance . . . shall in the future be an outpost of European civilization, or of the comparative barbarism of China.’”\textsuperscript{12}

Dole and Thurston shaped their new Republic’s constitution around this central concept; at their so-called “Continental Congress,” they insisted on a way to keep the “ignorant” natives from voting, as well as property requirements for all political candidates. Dole was aware that a true democracy would see the queen reinstated, as the new government was overwhelmingly unpopular in Hawaii. According to P.G.’s Attorney General, William O Smith, the Provisional Government planned to “‘combine an oligarchy with a representative form of government.’” In his pamphlet, Thurston claimed that America considered Hawaii more of a “little sister” than a fellow country and denied the natives’ claims of disenfranchisement. During the time of the takeover, white Hawaiian newspapers published racist political cartoons featuring the queen, making their political opinions abundantly clear.

The United States government, on the other hand, had a bigger picture to look at. Although the coup leaders’ reasoning for the takeover and annexation was initially dismissed, they had given Congress a clear path to acquire the islands. When Congress finally annexed Hawaii five years post-takeover, the United States were involved in the Spanish-American War, and the advantages seemed impossible to ignore. From a purely military standpoint, Hawaii provided a strategic Pacific naval base from which to attack the Spanish Philippines. Per the terms of the reciprocity treaty, Pearl Harbor technically belonged to the United States. And as the “Handbook” argued, annexing Hawaii would remove it from the stage of world politics, where it could serve as a place from which foreign countries could attack the American west coast. One

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of Congress’s largest concerns was Japan, with its relatively modern warships. According to President William McKinley, the new Pacific power was “‘doubtless awaiting her opportunity.’”

Although there were many major factors, the practicality of having a militant base in Pacific sealed the islands’ fate, pushing annexation through Congress in the summer of 1898.

In the end, despite organized protests, official delegations, and petitions with thousands of signatures, the native Hawaiians lost their fight. Liliuokalani spent the rest of her life in relative seclusion, and Charmian London, who met the queen in 1915, confirmed that the usurped monarch retained a “cold hatred for everything American.”

The Hawaiian people suffered greatly from the annexation. In Cook’s time, there were thought to be about 500,000 native speakers of the Hawaiian language. After annexation, their language was banned, and despite revitalization efforts, including the restoral of Hawaiian as a state language in 1978, there are only about 9000 speakers left. As more and more foreign laborers flooded in at the bequest of American capitalists, the sugar industry boomed. The self-proclaimed “‘people who love the land’” became foreigners on their own islands, lumped in with other minorities and suffering from American stereotypes.

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Although there were little to no gains for the islands initially, the Hawaiian sugar industry boomed after annexation, sating the “pseudo-Hawaiians” at last. Foreign laborers poured in, looking for work on plantations.

Their job completed, the coup leaders quickly settled into their new lives. When Hawaii became a territory in 1900, Dole was named its first governor. Thurston, on the other hand, retired from politics. He recognized the islands’ potential for tourism and a visit by famous American author Jack London in 1904 pleased him immensely and helped to turn the new territory into the hottest new vacation spot for wealthy families.

The greatest long-reaching impact of Hawaiian annexation was the utilization of Pearl Harbor as a naval base. Although construction did not ensue until 1908, Pearl Harbor fit Captain Mahan’s prediction of “America’s forward defense bastion.” This reputation cost it dearly on December 7, 1941 and plunged Hawaii into a world war that would secure its position as a Pacific power through the 20th century. Resounding consequences of the coup are omnipresent in Hawaiian life and culture today.

Overall, the Hawaiian legacy is one of shame, shelved along with tales of Native American massacres and African enslavement. In 1993, on the anniversary of the annexationists’ coup, President Bill Clinton issued a formal apology to Hawaii on behalf of the United States.

However, the effects of annexation and the exploitation of Americans are still evident today. Hawaii has the worst homeless rates per capita in the nation, and according to the Department of Housing and Urban Development, 42% of those are either native Hawaiians or other Pacific islanders. “We want to be treated as people, not problems,” says Twinkle Borge, who leads a large homeless camp on Oahu. Even the current government regulations, developed after statehood, are designed to benefit “‘non-Hawaiians who are not from here and who have access to resources that [Hawaiians] don’t have.’” Many of their newly revived cultural practices, such as the hula, have been commercialized and turned into a spectacle for tourists, and as a people, Recently, Hawaiian protests have grown more frequent and fervent, with younger Hawaiians exposed to the conflict through recent issues, such as a thwarted attempt by the American government to mount the world’s largest telescope atop Mauna Kea, which native Hawaiians consider sacred. Above all, many Hawaiians fear for their safety as an American bastion. Although a recent missile threat was proved spurious, it launched mass panic, and opened many Hawaiian eyes. “It should be clear by now that if any nation is threatening our security, it is the United States,” said Jon Osorio, a Hawaiian studies professor.

“What it means to be Native Hawaiian [today] is obviously shaped by colonialism and imperialism in Hawaii, so we as a people have a lot of burden to carry and are often blamed for

individual failures [like homelessness] that are beyond our control,” asserts Kalani Young, a Native Hawaiian researcher.26

Hawaii’s unique path to statehood was fraught with triumph and tragedy, and although its acquisition may represent a murky past that most modern Americans feel rightly ashamed of, it is time for the United States as a nation to own up to its past mistakes and face the consequences of its actions. For as Queen Liliuokalani said of her subjects:

“‘Oh, honest Americans, as Christians hear me for my down-trodden people! Their form of government is as dear to them as yours is precious to you. Quite as warmly as you love your country, so they love theirs.’”27

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