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The Debate Over Hawaii and an American Overseas Empire

Revolutionaries easily overthrew the native Hawaiian monarchy in 1893. The United States then debated for five years whether to annex the former kingdom and launch an American overseas empire.

By 1795, the warrior chief, Kamehameha the Great, had conquered most of the Hawaiian islands and established a monarchy. In the 1820s, American whalers, traders, and Christian missionaries began to visit and settle in the kingdom of Hawaii.

Although a small minority, the Americans in Hawaii soon owned much of the land, which they began to turn into large sugar-cane plantations. The native Hawaiian population dropped sharply due to smallpox and other diseases that came with the American immigrants. Needing more workers, the sugar planters imported Chinese and Japanese contract laborers who agreed to work on the plantations for a set period of time.

As their influence increased, the Americans became deeply involved with the government of the Hawaiian kings. In 1840, American advisors helped King Kamehameha III produce Hawaii's [first written constitution](#).

By 1842, the United States had developed regular diplomatic relations with Hawaii and supported its status as an independent country. After King David Kalakaua ascended the throne in 1874, Hawaii and the United States signed a trade agreement lifting some restrictions on exporting Hawaiian sugar to the United States. In addition, this agreement permitted the United States to lease a naval station at Pearl Harbor.

For a long time, Americans (both U.S. citizens and those born in Hawaii of American parents) had resented living under the Hawaiian monarchy. They believed that since they owned about two-thirds of the land and paid the majority of taxes, they deserved a greater say in the government.

In 1887, a group of armed Americans forced King Kalakaua to agree to a [new constitution](#) that weakened his power. This constitution also contained property requirements that prevented about 75 percent of the native Hawaiians from voting for representatives to the legislature.

After Kalakaua's death in 1891, his sister, Lydia Liliuokalani, became queen. She was determined to reclaim the monarchy's old power on behalf of her people.

On January 14, 1893, Queen Liliuokalani announced her intention to proclaim a new constitution on her own authority. On hearing this news, a group of about a dozen, mainly American, business and political leaders started plotting to overthrow the monarchy. Almost immediately, the queen withdrew her plan for a new constitution. But the revolutionaries claimed that Liliuokalani had given up her right to rule by violating her oath to the current constitution.

On January 16, the U.S. diplomatic representative in Honolulu, John Stevens, asked the U.S. Navy "to protect the life and property of American citizens." Four boatloads of marines from an American warship in the harbor came ashore, marched into the city, and surrounded the royal palace. Stevens granted U.S. recognition to the provisional government that the revolutionaries had formed.

The revolutionaries appointed [Sanford Dole](#), the son of American missionary parents and a Hawaiian Supreme Court justice, to head the provisional government. On January 17, Dole and a few hundred armed supporters went to the palace to demand the queen's surrender. With nearly 200 American troops nearby, Queen Liliuokalani surrendered under protest. "I yield to the superior force of the United States of America," she said. The provisional government immediately sent a commission to the United States to persuade President Benjamin Harrison and Congress to annex Hawaii as a U.S. territory.

A few months after the Hawaiian Revolution, an American naval historian, Captain Alfred Mahan, published a stunning article titled, "[Hawaii and Our Future Sea Power](#)." Mahan argued that the United States should abandon its tradition of isolationism and, like imperial Great Britain, acquire an overseas empire, starting with Hawaii. Mahan's essay marked the beginning of a long and often bitter debate in the United States on the question of whether the United States should become an imperial world power.

President Cleveland Says No

President Harrison harbored some doubts about the revolution in Hawaii, but he signed an annexation treaty with the provisional government in February 1893. He sent the treaty to the U.S. Senate for ratification.

Back in Hawaii, the provisional government, consisting of about 20 white men, began to worry about the native Hawaiian majority that the revolutionaries had largely ignored. The provisional government declared martial law and ordered newspapers not to stir up trouble. The new government also persuaded John Stevens, the U.S. diplomat, to place Hawaii under temporary American military protection.

Popular opinion in the United States favored the treaty. But the presidency changed from Republican Harrison to Democrat Grover Cleveland, who objected to the use of U.S. troops in the overthrow of Queen Liliuokalani. Cleveland withdrew the treaty from the Senate.

President Cleveland appointed a former member of Congress, John Blount, to go to Hawaii to find out what had happened. Blount interviewed the members of the provisional government, supporters of the revolution and the monarchy, and Queen Liliuokalani herself. She told Blount that the "missionary party" had worked for years so that "their children might some day be rulers over these Islands."

Blount's fact-finding report convinced President Cleveland that U.S. diplomat John Stevens had acted improperly by calling for American troops, whose presence caused the queen to surrender. Cleveland sent a new diplomat to Hawaii to pressure the provisional government to restore the monarchy and the queen to grant amnesty to the revolutionaries.

The provisional government refused to accept Cleveland's demands. Sanford Dole, president of the provisional government, declared that the United States had no right to interfere in Hawaii's internal affairs. Surprisingly, the queen at first also refused to go along with Cleveland, saying she would never pardon the revolutionaries. She changed her mind and offered amnesty. But by this time, Cleveland had decided to let Congress debate the Hawaiian issue.

The Republic of Hawaii

Sanford Dole and the other members of the provisional government recognized that the United States probably would never annex Hawaii as long as Cleveland was in the White House. So they decided that they had better form a more permanent government.

In June 1894, a convention, composed mostly of Hawaiian-born Americans and foreign residents, produced a new constitution for the Republic of Hawaii. The constitution named Sanford Dole the first president. It stated that the republic's main goal was to be annexed by the United States. The constitution placed property and income qualifications on the right to vote and required voters to take an oath against restoring the monarchy. The provisional government proclaimed the constitution on July 4, 1894, without any ratification vote by the people.

In January 1895, about 300 supporters of Queen Liliuokalani took up arms and attempted to restore her to power. But the government quickly defeated and captured the royalist rebels.

The government established a military commission, tried about 200 rebels for treason, and sentenced most of them to prison. The government also tried the queen for treason. She denied any involvement with the rebellion, but declared that she owed no allegiance to the Republic of Hawaii, only to her people. After finding her guilty, the government restricted her to an apartment in the palace. Within a year, the government freed all the royalist prisoners, including the queen.

"It Is Manifest Destiny"

Republican William McKinley won the American presidential election of 1896. He acted quickly to sign a new annexation treaty shortly after he took office in 1897. Again, the question of Hawaiian annexation moved to the U.S. Senate.

Imperialists, like Captain Mahan and Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt, argued that annexing Hawaii would help the United States become a world power. But the anti-imperialists opposed annexation. "The mission of our nation," said former President Cleveland, "is to build up and make a greater country out of what we have, instead of annexing islands." Thus, the fate of Hawaii became entwined in the larger debate over whether the United States should acquire an overseas empire.

By 1897, two powerful American interest groups had joined the anti-imperialists in opposing Hawaii annexation. The sugar beet industry did not want to compete with cheaper Hawaiian sugar. Also, many labor unions disliked the contract labor system in Hawaii and feared Chinese and Japanese workers from there would flood into the mainland, driving down wages.

The annexation effort bogged down in the Senate where a two-thirds majority is necessary for treaty ratification. But on February 15, 1898, the U.S. ship *Maine* exploded in Havana Harbor. Soon afterward, the United States declared war on Spain and invaded Cuba. Then on May 1, Admiral George Dewey destroyed the Spanish fleet in the Philippines. Suddenly, Hawaii's strategic location halfway to the Philippines revived interest in annexation.

The annexationists abandoned their treaty ratification campaign in the Senate. They decided to seek a joint resolution by the House of Representatives and the Senate to annex Hawaii. This required only a simple majority vote in each house. "We need Hawaii just as much and a good deal more than we did California," said President McKinley. "It is Manifest Destiny."

Hawaii and Empire

While the war against Spain continued during the summer of 1898, supporters of Hawaiian annexation made their case in Congress. Many pointed out the necessity of Hawaii as a refueling station for Navy ships on their way to reinforce American troops in the Philippines. Most of those speaking out for annexation, however, argued that Hawaii was essential for expanding trade with China and other Asian countries.

The House passed the Hawaiian [annexation resolution](#) 209-91 on June 15. Sensing defeat, the anti-annexationists made their last stand during a Senate filibuster (a delaying tactic in which Senators give never-ending speeches). They hoped to talk the resolution to death.

Senator Stephen White of California led the filibuster. "The annexation of Hawaii," he said, "will constitute the entering wedge for an imperialistic policy." He and his allies

asked whether Americans should forget their own anti-colonial war for independence and establish a colonial empire of foreign peoples.

The filibuster speakers argued Hawaii had little military value. The United States already leased Pearl Harbor, and refueling at the island of Kiska (part of American Alaska) provided a shorter route to the Philippines than stopping over in Hawaii. Besides, defending Hawaii would spread the Navy too thin.

Many Senate speakers doubted that Hawaii could fit into our democracy. Some questioned the capability of the native Hawaiians to vote and participate as U.S. citizens. Senator White asked if Americans should affiliate with Hawaiians who lived "far removed and alien to us in language and ideas." Others criticized that the natives, who still made up a large majority of the population, had never voted on annexing their country to the United States.

After two weeks of speech making, the anti-annexationists gave up their filibuster. On July 6, the Senate voted 42-21 to pass the joint resolution. President McKinley signed the measure the next day. Two years later, Congress passed the [Organic Act](#), making Hawaii a U.S. territory and setting up its government. In the end, immediate wartime pressures and a desire to expand markets overseas combined to hand victory to the annexationists and imperialists.

Sanford Dole, the former president of the Hawaiian Republic, was appointed territorial governor. The first territorial elections, held in the fall of 1900, proved shocking. Candidates favoring Hawaiian independence won a majority of seats in both houses of the new territorial legislature. One of the royalist rebels, who had taken up arms to restore Queen Liliuokalani to power in 1895, was elected as Hawaii's first delegate to Congress. But this was the last election in which candidates supporting independence showed such strength. In 1902, Hawaiian Prince Jonah Kuhio Kalaniana'ole Piikoi ran for Congress as a Republican and won. After that, the independence movement faded away.

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The debate in Congress over Hawaiian annexation took five years. During that time, the imperialists and anti-imperialists thoroughly argued their positions. After the Spanish-American War, Congress took less than a year to approve the acquisition of the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Guam, and Wake Island. The United States then had its overseas empire.

For Discussion and Writing

1. Do you think the United States should have annexed Hawaii in 1898? Why or why not?
2. Why did President Cleveland and President McKinley differ over annexing Hawaii?

3. What role did Hawaii play in establishing an American empire?

For Further Information

[Hawaii's Story](#) By Queen Liliuokalani.

[Hawaii Looking Back](#) A history by the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* newspaper.

[The Royal Family of Hawaii](#) A history of Hawaii.

[A Brief History of Hawaii](#)

[The Annexation of Hawaii: A Collection of Documents](#) From the University of Hawaii at Manoa Libraries.

[President Cleveland's Message to Congress on Annexation](#)

[Debate Over the Annexation of Hawaii](#) Excerpt from historian Hubert Bancroft's history of the United States written in the early 1900s.