

# Xenophobia and the Battle for Hawaiian Statehood

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The United States annexed Hawaii as a territory in 1898, but Congress did not pass a statehood bill in Congress until 1959. The territory petitioned for statehood sixteen times and introduced thirty-three different statehood bills before it attained its goal—more such bills than any other state in American history. For more than six decades, America was not ready to give Hawaiians the same privileges and responsibilities that citizens living in mainland states enjoyed. Rather than allowing the Hawaiians to elect their own governors and judges, the Federal government took responsibility for appointing territorial officers. While the territory was allowed to elect representatives into Congress, the votes of those representatives were not counted.

The roots of this long delay of first-class citizenship for the Hawaiians have been much disputed, but two in particular stand out: distance and race. In *The Shoal of Time*, historian Gavan Daws of the University of Hawaii points to the vast distance separating the Islands from the rest of the nation. Statehood admission of a noncontiguous territory was unprecedented in the United States, and for that reason many were wary of making such a bold move.<sup>1</sup> But historians T. Michael Holmes and John Whitehead explain the long delay in granting statehood differently. In *The Specter of Communism in Hawaii*, Holmes identifies the issue of race as the “real power behind the move to block Hawaiian statehood.”<sup>2</sup> Whitehead takes the same stance in *Completing the Union*, arguing that Hawaii’s predominantly Asian population was the principal cause for anti-statehood sentiment in America.<sup>3</sup>

The ethnically diverse population of the Hawaiian Islands was not unlike America, the “melting pot” of the world, but was dissimilar in

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that its ethnically diverse population was not dominated by a white majority. In 1900, Caucasians made up 87.9 percent of the population of the continental United States, but only 17.3 percent of the Hawaiian Islands.<sup>4</sup> Whites accustomed to being in the majority at home found themselves in the minority to Asians and Hawaiians in the new territory. Daws's argument of distance sugarcoats the de facto motivations behind American resistance to Hawaiian statehood. Xenophobia was what drove the anti-statehood movement.

Americans were afraid of one race in particular: the Japanese. Their presence meant competition for white laborers and their vast differences from the Americans made them easy targets for suspicion, especially when it came to their loyalties before and during the Second World War. Various presidential administrations made attempts to shift the demographic balance away from the Japanese by limiting their voting and immigration rights. But as America emerged from the war and entered the global crisis of the Cold War as the leader of the "free world," its image as a role model was in jeopardy. The words "racism" and "imperialism" had become contradictory to American ideology, and these same terms were apparent in the nature of Hawaii as a territory rather than a state. The timing of the decision to grant statehood in 1959, following the peak of these Cold War tensions, further reveals that race-based misgivings had motivated the anti-statehood movement all along.

### Ocean Roadblock

Hawaii, an archipelago floating in the middle of the vast Pacific, was unlike any existing states: it was separated from the rest of the nation by thousands of miles. Hawaii was 2,400 air miles away from San Francisco and almost 5,000 miles away from Washington D.C., making travel to and from the mainland inconvenient at best. Not only did many Americans see the idea of extending statehood overseas as unrealistic, some argued that the lack of precedent made it un-American. Gavan Daws cites Kenneth M. Regan, a Democratic Representative from Texas, arguing that taking on Hawaii as a state was not the sort of act that

George Washington had intended for the United States.<sup>5</sup> Americans were used to states being added on naturally as the frontier pushed westward. California's 1850 statehood may have preceded many admissions of states in the Midwest; however, California was still a territory on the mainland, contiguous to other American territories. Now that the frontier was stretched over miles of the Pacific Ocean, statehood did not seem to come naturally.

Some politicians tied the cultural discrepancies between Hawaii and the mainland to the distance between them rather than to racial differences. Just a year before Hawaii was granted statehood, Republican Senator George Malone of Nevada took the opportunity to explain his history of voting against statehood in the Congressional record. He claimed that his objection to Hawaiian statehood was based on the fact that the territory was far away from the rest of the American people, and that Hawaiians "have no direct knowledge of life and conditions in the United States, and because of this their ways of life are different from ours."<sup>6</sup> The worry that the Hawaiians could not be assimilated to the nation at large because of the distances involved helped to intensify a more memorable setback in Hawaiian statehood—the issue of communism.

As the Cold War began and the paranoia over subversive behavior peaked with the House Un-American Activities Committee and Senator Joseph McCarthy's witch hunt, the distance that separated the Hawaiians from the rest of America made for mystery and suspicion as to what might be going on in Hawaii without the rest of the country knowing. Hawaii's location in the middle of the Pacific was dangerously close to rival nations in the East who Americans feared could spread communist influence into America via Hawaiian representatives and voters if the territory were granted statehood. In 1949, Republican Senator Hugh Butler of Nebraska, a notorious opponent of statehood for Hawaii, was quoted in the *Dallas Morning News* warning Congress that "...the Communists are softening up Hawaii in an effort to capture it as a base for operations against the American form of government."<sup>7</sup> Politicians like Butler argued that Hawaii was simply too far away to be trusted.

But if the people living in Hawaii were naturalized, predominantly white “Americans,” would considerations of distance from the U.S. and proximity to mainland Asia have derailed statehood? Would Americans have been as wary of people of their own race and background?

### Efforts to Alter the Ethnic Composition

If the ethnic makeup of Hawaii had not been a significant problem to Americans, attempts to change that composition would not have been necessary. However, there were numerous efforts by various presidential administrations to restrict the immigration of Asians into Hawaii. This includes the enforcement of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Gentlemen’s Agreement of 1907 and numerous Immigration Acts, especially the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924. The ethnic makeup of Hawaii was unappealing to Americans because its population was dominated not by a white majority, but instead by what was only an obscure minority on the mainland—Asians.

Asians were cheaper and more efficient laborers than whites, and their presence made it next to impossible for white workers to get jobs on the Islands. Many people viewed Asian culture as the polar opposite of American culture, deeply unfamiliar and impossible to assimilate. According to the 1900 census, the racial breakdown of Hawaii was as follows: 16.7 percent Chinese, 17.3 percent Caucasian, 25.7 percent Hawaiian and 39.7 percent Japanese.<sup>8</sup> White men were scarce, present only for military service or for the business of lucrative sugar corporations, where they exploited cheap Asian labor. In the next few decades, the American government took repeated steps to expand the white population and reduce the Asian one.

In 1882 Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, barring Chinese laborers from immigrating to America and hindering those already in the country from being naturalized.<sup>9</sup> This act pushed Chinese immigration away from the American mainland towards the independent Kingdom of Hawaii, and the population of Chinese-Hawaiians consequently boomed. But when Hawaii became a U.S. territory, the Chinese Exclusion Act was renewed in 1902 to apply to Hawaii,

halting Chinese immigration to the Islands.<sup>10</sup> The Chinese living there already were not able to be naturalized or vote in Hawaiian territorial elections. As a result, the Chinese population on the Islands became politically insignificant.

Theodore Roosevelt's Gentlemen's Agreement of 1907 with Japan reflects America's aversion to Japanese immigrants and suggests that Americans sharing his perspective would not have been enthusiastic about the admission of Hawaii's overwhelmingly Japanese population to statehood. Americans faced unwanted competition for jobs and undercutting of wages by Japanese immigrants both on the mainland and especially in Hawaii. Roosevelt negotiated with the Japanese government and came to the agreement that Japanese laborers would be barred from immigrating to both continental America and the Hawaiian Islands. Only immigrants who were former residents or immediate family members to American citizens were excluded from the agreement.<sup>11</sup> This legislation was a clear, and successful, effort to cut Japanese immigration into the Hawaiian Islands and open up jobs for white Americans who wished to move to the Islands.

Racial ideals for Hawaii were made plain in Roosevelt's memorandum of 1909 in which he warned a close senatorial ally, Philander Knox of Pennsylvania, of the "threat of Japan." He referred to Hawaii as an island of "coolie-tilled plantations" and wrote that he believed America's aim should be to replace the Japanese workers with workers of European heritage "in order that the islands may be filled with a white population of our general civilization and culture."<sup>12</sup> This distrust and distaste for Japanese "coolies" illustrates the fear that lay behind Roosevelt's anti-statehood stance and that of many other politicians at the time. His preference for workers of European heritage, rather than any naturalized Americans, reveals that the President saw the most value in "whiteness" and therefore saw little value in Hawaii's population.

The Immigration Act of 1924, also known as the Johnson-Reed Act, closed off Japanese immigration to the United States almost entirely. The act changed the regulation of immigration to a quota system in which each foreign country was allowed only a specific number of

people, equivalent to two percent of the existing population in the U.S., into the country each year. The act reflected not only the drive of American government to limit further immigration of Japanese, but also all “undesirables” such as other Asians and Eastern Europeans. By favoring certain races over others, this act illustrates the unselfconsciously racist ideas of the time, making it reasonable to conclude that racial considerations carried weight in the case of Hawaii statehood.

By 1945, 6.0 percent of the Hawaiian population was Chinese, 14.4 percent was Hawaiian and part Hawaiian, 32.5 percent was Japanese and 34.4 percent was Caucasian.<sup>13</sup> The Chinese, Japanese and Hawaiian populations all fell relative to the growth of the Caucasian population, which nearly doubled. A plurality of the population was not Asian or Hawaiian, but white. In March of 1946, Americans favored statehood for Hawaii 3 to 1.<sup>14</sup> It wasn't until after these demographic changes had been made that Hawaii was finally admitted to the Union.

### America's Global Image and Civil Rights

The timing of Hawaii's admission as a state in August of 1959 exposes the dominant cause for delay beforehand. Following the Second World War, America wore the title of the leading “free nation” of the world. Coming out of a passionate war and entering the Cold War against communism, America had to maintain its self-appointed role as a nation that believed in equality of all and in personal freedoms. To avoid appearing hypocritical, the nation was forced to make changes; overseas colonies and racial discrimination at home no longer fit the ideals the nation claimed to espouse.<sup>15</sup>

Southern Democrats were able to filibuster statehood hearings and put off the measures from passing for years. Most were against Hawaii statehood for two reasons: their traditional idea of America as a country for white men, and the fact that the addition of two Hawaiian votes in the Senate would eliminate the slim anti-Civil Rights majority in Congress.<sup>16</sup> Southern Democrats saw the admission of Hawaii as an approval of racial integration. Historian Benjamin Shearer attributes the resistance from those senators to “the belief that the ad-

mission of Hawaii would sharpen the growing criticisms of the racial practices in their home states.<sup>17</sup> If the territory were allowed into the Union, the traditional white-supremacist beliefs in the South would start to appear outdated, and those Southern Democrats might lose power.<sup>18</sup> The hostility of these politicians to statehood points clearly to racist motivation.

In 1947 President Harry Truman preached to Congress about America's duty to defend the "peaceful development of nations, free from coercion" and to defend "individual liberty."<sup>19</sup> Nowhere in his famous Truman Doctrine speech did the President comment on injustices within America. The focus was on the emerging conflict with the communists and on praising American ideals. But America was more than its ideals. The reality of America was the deeply segregated South and its overseas territories where citizens were not being allotted their full set of rights. Possibly in response to this glaring contradiction, Truman sent a Civil Rights Message to Congress in 1948:

*The position of the United States in the world today makes it especially urgent that we adopt these measures to secure for all our people their essential rights. ... If we wish to fulfill the promise that is ours, we must correct the remaining imperfections in our practice of democracy.*<sup>20</sup>

Here Truman explicitly states that the changes he seeks are called for because they are necessary to preserve American prestige in the tenuous time of the Cold War. In this message he requested the consideration of many civil rights causes such as equalizing the ability of each American to become naturalized, ensuring more freedom at the polls, admitting both Hawaii and Alaska into the Union as states as well as increasing self-government in other U.S. island possessions.<sup>21</sup> Here Hawaiian statehood is being promoted right alongside Civil Rights measures—all in the name of overcoming racism and prejudice. This is not a coincidence: Truman includes statehood to underline the unequal status of people under territorial government, thus suggesting that racial motivations had driven anti-statehood sentiments.

## Conclusion

Amongst some of the last states to be admitted into the union are Oklahoma in 1907, New Mexico and Arizona in 1912, and Alaska in 1959. The one thing that they all had in common as territories was their white minority. When first acquired by the U.S. at the turn of the twentieth century, Hawaii was “infested” with foreigners. But after a few decades of immigration restrictions and an influx of white people, the previously alarming diversity of the population became manageable and resistance to statehood dwindled. Hawaiians were second-class Americans, yet that didn’t seem to matter on the mainland until the nation was put under a spotlight following the Second World War. In light of the new ideological competition with the Soviets, America’s imperialistic treatment of the Islanders became impossible to ignore. It was time for Americans to practice what they preached, and racism was no longer to be given a free pass. Hawaii was swept up in the Civil Rights movement and America slowly began to be the nation that it claimed to be. When statehood was granted in 1959, the population was no longer so menacingly foreign, and American resistance was not so strong.

This story of Hawaiian statehood does not paint an attractive picture of America. However, it appears unattractive only because I am a student with a modern-day perspective. I have grown up in a world where Civil Rights for all Americans has always been promoted as a good thing, not an illogical or even dangerous notion. Because of the shift that America went through following the Second World War, my perspective on my nation and its place in the world is drastically different from those of the people I have studied in my research. As a white, middle-class young woman in the forties, I might have seen the Civil Rights movement as completely absurd. Today, racial inequality strikes me as immoral. My argument in this paper may be hard for many Americans to believe. We don’t want to think our country was ever so highly racially motivated—so “un-American” by today’s definition. But just because our ideals have changed, that does not make earlier Americans wrong—just different.

## Notes

1. Gavan Daws, *Shoal of Time* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1968), 386.
2. T. Michael Holmes, *The Specter of Communism in Hawaii* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 175.
3. John S. Whitehead, *Completing the Union: Alaska, Hawai'i, and the Battle for Statehood* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 18.
4. "United States—Race and Hispanic Origin: 1790 to 1990," September 13, 2002, U.S. Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov/population> (accessed January 30, 2010); Whitehead, *Completing the Union*.
5. Daws.
6. Senator George W. Malone of Nevada on statehood in Hawaii, 85th Cong., 2d sess., Cong. Rec. (21 March 1958), 5041–5042, *Annals of American History* <http://america.eb.com> (accessed March 3, 2010).
7. Harry C. Withers, "Alien Communists Throttle Hawaii," *Dallas Morning News*, July 8, 1949.
8. Whitehead.
9. "Chinese Immigration and the Chinese Exclusion Acts," U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov> (accessed March 3, 2010).
10. *Ibid.*
11. Reports of the Department of Commerce and Labor, (20 February 1907), 221–222, *Annals of American History*, <http://america.eb.com> (accessed February 15, 2010).

12. Theodore Roosevelt to Philander Knox, February 8, 1909, *Annals of American History*, <http://america.eb.com> (accessed January 12, 2010).
13. Abraham Chapman, "Hawaii Seeks Statehood," *Institute of Pacific Relations*, 15, no. 14 (July 17, 1946): 210, chart.
14. *Ibid.*, 213.
15. Heefner, 551.
16. J.D. Bowers, "The State of Hawaii," in *The Uniting States*, ed. Benjamin F. Shearer (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004), 307.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*
19. President Harry Truman before a joint session of Congress, 80th Cong., 1st sess., *Cong. Rec.* (12 March 1947), 1980-1981, *Annals of American History*, <http://america.eb.com> (accessed February 20, 2010).
20. President Harry Truman on Civil Rights, 80th Cong, 2d Sess., H. Doc 516. (2 February 1948), *Annals of American History*, <http://america.eb.com> (accessed January 17, 2010).
21. *Ibid.*

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