

## **American Attitudes Toward the Annexation of Hawaii: Military, Morality, and Misrepresentation**

In January 1893, a group of white businessmen overthrew the constitutional monarchy of Hawaii and set up their own government.<sup>1</sup> Then, they proposed that the United States should incorporate this former kingdom in the middle of the Pacific as a territory.<sup>2</sup> Surprisingly, America did not accept this offer for free territory right away, especially when that territory occupied an extremely crucial position in Pacific trade and naval operations.<sup>3</sup> Between 1893 and 1898, proponents of annexation primarily argued that annexing Hawaii would secure America's defensive needs and secondarily protect the Hawaiian people, while also saying that the US government had a moral responsibility to restore justice and freedom to the islands. Opponents argued that annexing Hawaii would be morally wrong and would constitute a betrayal of American ideals. The Spanish-American War in 1898 shifted the debate by emphasizing Hawaii's military importance, which ultimately led to annexation. Afterwards, the US exaggerated the differences between Hawaii before and after annexation to portray it as prosperous and free under American rule—a narrative which was needed to depict America as the defender of freedom and the oppressed.

Proponents for annexing Hawaii argued primarily that annexation would be the best way to solidify America's standing as a great power, and secondarily that annexation would help the people who lived in Hawaii. When the provisional government set up in Hawaii after the coup first sent a request for annexation in February 1893, Benjamin Harrison's presidency was in its

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<sup>1</sup> Klees van Dijk, "The Failed Annexation of Hawaii," In *Pacific Strife*, (Amsterdam University Press: 2015), 371-372. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt15nmjw8.21>.

<sup>2</sup> Dijk, "The Failed Annexation of Hawaii", 375.

<sup>3</sup> Dijk, "The Failed Annexation of Hawaii", 362.

last weeks.<sup>4</sup> Harrison wanted to annex Hawaii because he saw annexation as the best way to serve the military interests of the United States primarily and a way to protect the people of Hawaii secondarily. In a speech he gave to the Senate along with a treaty of annexation, he said:

Only two courses of action are now open—one the establishment of a protectorate by the United States, and the other annexation full and complete. I think the latter course, which has been adopted in the treaty, will be highly promotive of the best interests of the Hawaiian people, and is the only one that will adequately secure the interests of the United States...It is essential that none of the other great powers shall secure these islands. Such a position would not consist with our safety and with the peace of the world.<sup>5</sup>

When Harrison concluded that America must annex Hawaii, he said that annexation was the “only”<sup>6</sup> way to secure US interests, implying that none of the other options (such as making Hawaii a protectorate) would be beneficial. Interestingly, Harrison narrowed the US interests side of his argument by explaining that leaving Hawaii as-is would leave it, and by extension America, vulnerable to other powers—a belief that reflected fears in Washington that Hawaii falling into foreign hands would make the West Coast susceptible to attack by a European power or the rapidly emerging Japan<sup>7</sup>. Regarding the people living in Hawaii, he said that annexation would be “highly promotive”<sup>8</sup> of their interests, a much weaker choice of words. Harrison then said, “[Annexation] should be, and I do not doubt will be, not only just to the natives and all other residents and citizens of the islands, but should be characterized by great liberality and a high regard to the rights of all people and of all foreigners domiciled here.”<sup>9</sup> In contrast to his strategic use argument, he argued that annexation would help Hawaiians in a roundabout manner,

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<sup>4</sup> National Archives and Records Administration, “The 1897 petition against the annexation of Hawaii,” National Archives and Records Administration, retrieved April 13, 2022, from <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/hawaii-petition>.

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin Harrison, “Annexation of the Hawaiian Islands,” in *Public Papers and Addresses of Benjamin Harrison, Twenty-third President of the United States: March 4, 1889, to March 4, 1893*, (Washington, D.C: Government Printing Office, 1893), 215.

<sup>6</sup> Harrison, “Annexation of the Hawaiian Islands,” 215.

<sup>7</sup> Dijk, “The Failed Annexation of Hawaii”, 375.

<sup>8</sup> Harrison, “Annexation of the Hawaiian Islands,” 215.

<sup>9</sup> Harrison, “Annexation of the Hawaiian Islands,” 215.

never specifying what rights would be given nor what the treaty would do exactly. While Harrison may have had clear and specific reasons to annex Hawaii in the military interest of America, his reasons became much more vague when it came to the humanitarian interest of Hawaiians themselves. For pro-annexationists like Harrison, annexing Hawaii was first and foremost an opportunity to benefit America's global standing, and second a way to aid the residents there.

Proponents for annexation also argued that the US had a moral obligation to annex Hawaii since the previous government had failed to protect the rights of the people living there. In the same speech he gave to the Senate with the annexation treaty, Harrison said:

It has been the policy of the administration not only to respect but to encourage the continuance of an independent government in the Hawaiian Islands so long as it afforded suitable guaranties for the protection of life and property, and maintained a stability and strength that gave adequate security against the domination of any other power. The moral support of this Government has continually manifested itself in the most friendly diplomatic relations.<sup>10</sup>

Harrison painted the government of Hawaii before annexation as just and free, providing the “protection of life and property”<sup>11</sup>; Consequently, America had no reason to annex the kingdom. Talking about how Hawaii was secure against foreign threats, he noted those foreign threats as “domination of any other power,”<sup>12</sup> implying that domination by the US was somehow not as much a threat to Hawaii as by anyone else. But, the US instead chose to maintain friendly relations as a showing of what he called “moral support”<sup>13</sup> for the government. Therefore, if the government became undeserving of that moral support at some point, America was justified in severing those relations. He then continued:

The overthrow of the monarchy was not in any way promoted by this Government, but had its origin in what seems to have been a reactionary and revolutionary policy on the

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<sup>10</sup> Harrison, “Annexation of the Hawaiian Islands,” 214-215.

<sup>11</sup> Harrison, “Annexation of the Hawaiian Islands,” 214.

<sup>12</sup> Harrison, “Annexation of the Hawaiian Islands,” 214.

<sup>13</sup> Harrison, “Annexation of the Hawaiian Islands,” 214.

part of Queen Liliuokalani...It is quite evident that the monarchy had become effete and the Queen's government so weak and inadequate.<sup>14</sup> Harrison blamed the monarchy of Hawaii for causing this whole situation because they had become “so weak and inadequate”<sup>15</sup> that the US had to intervene. He was especially eager to deny any US involvement in the coup (such as the fact that 162 American Marines had helped coup leaders occupy Honolulu<sup>16</sup>) to scapegoat the Queen of Hawaii for her “reactionary and revolutionary policy,”<sup>17</sup> especially since that same Queen was smeared by many newspapers as Black, pagan, scandalous, and desiring of absolute power. Now that she had failed to provide the freedoms Harrison credited the Hawaiian monarchy with providing, the US had to replace her government with one that did provide those freedoms. By showing the annexation of Hawaii from this angle, Harrison pointed out how it was America’s moral duty to rule Hawaii and provide the same freedoms to the people that the monarchy had failed to grant.

Opposition to annexing Hawaii was based on whether it was ethically right or fair for the United States to exert its power as such. While annexation was first requested during the Harrison presidency, the responsibility for carrying it out fell on Grover Cleveland, who took office a few weeks afterward.<sup>18</sup> Cleveland refused to carry through the annexation of Hawaii because his belief in US justice and honor conflicted with previous US actions propping up a provisional government he perceived as undemocratic. In a message in December 18, 1893, he stated:

It has been the settled policy of the United States to concede to people of foreign countries the same freedom and independence...that we have always claimed for ourselves...and but for Minister Stevens’ recognition of the provisional government when the United States

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<sup>14</sup> Harrison, “Annexation of the Hawaiian Islands,” 215.

<sup>15</sup> Harrison, “Annexation of the Hawaiian Islands,” 215.

<sup>16</sup> Lawrence Burr, *US Cruisers 1803-1804: The birth of the steel navy*. (Philadelphia: Osprey Publishing, 2011), 35.

<sup>17</sup> Harrison, “Annexation of the Hawaiian Islands,” 215.

<sup>18</sup> “Annexation of Hawaii, 1898,” U.S. Department of State, U.S. Department of State, accessed May 3, 2022, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/gp/17661.htm>.

forces were its sole support and constituted its only military strength, the Queen and her government would have never yielded to the provisional government, even for a time and for the sole purpose of submitting her cast to the enlightened justice of the United States...if a feeble but friendly state is in danger of being robbed of its independence and its sovereignty by a misuse of the name and power of the United States, the United States cannot fail to vindicate its honor and sense of justice by an earnest effort to make all possible reparation.<sup>19</sup>

Noting how American recognition and military support propped up the provisional government, Cleveland asserted that the US was involved in overthrowing Queen Liliuokalani; therefore, Washington had not treated the Hawaiian government with the same freedom and respect that would be given to any other nation. Because Hawaii was deprived of that recognition as an equal nation, annexation would constitute an irredeemable and dishonorable misuse of power that would go against what he defined as “[the US’s] honor and sense of justice.”<sup>20</sup> By depicting annexation this way, he painted the issue of annexing Hawaii as much more of a moral issue, of whether making this formerly sovereign place a territory went against America’s “enlightened justice”<sup>21</sup> and honor. Cleveland’s opposition to the annexation of Hawaii stemmed from his beliefs that the US would be turning its back on its principles and would no longer be able to take the moral high ground. And therefore, he refused to allow annexation to continue.<sup>22</sup> Even when William McKinley (an ardent imperialist) took over as president in 1897, the Senate rejected his first attempt to annex Hawaii—a vote in which only 46 Senators voted for annexation.<sup>23</sup> Anti-annexationists argued that annexing Hawaii would not be a noble act the US would undertake, but an unfair, undemocratic power grab that went against American principles of justice and honor.

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<sup>19</sup> The Hawaiian Sovereignty Movement, [www.hookele.com/non-hawaiians/cleveland.html](http://www.hookele.com/non-hawaiians/cleveland.html) (accessed November 22, 2002). From Sturgis, Amy H., *Presidents From Hayes Through McKinley, 1877-1901* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2003), 155-157.

<sup>20</sup> Sturgis, 155-157.

<sup>21</sup> Sturgis, 155-157.

<sup>22</sup> National Archives and Records Administration, “1897 petition.”

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

The Spanish-American War pushed America towards annexing Hawaii because it emphasized the militaristic importance of Hawaii versus the moral aspect of annexation. When, in 1898, the Spanish-American War began with the sinking of the *USS Maine* in Havana, Cuba, the US turned to Hawaii as a potential military base to launch an invasion of the Philippines ( a Spanish colony at the time).<sup>24</sup> Because of this added military importance given to Hawaii, debate in America about Hawaii focused on the strategic aspect of annexation and de-emphasized the ethical implications. On June 12, 1898, the *San Francisco Call* released an article titled “Debate on Annexation of Hawaii”<sup>25</sup> with subtitles “Advocates Declare the Islands a Military Necessity”<sup>26</sup> and “Opponents Show That This Country Already Has a Good Route to the Philippines.”<sup>27</sup> These subtitles did not pose the annexation of Hawaii as an issue of righteousness or American principles, but rather of how useful annexing Hawaii would be in invading the Philippines—a new strategic use opened by the Spanish-American War. By placing the arguments centered around said strategic use in the title of the piece, the article would then indicate that the debate around Hawaii was primarily about whether the island chain’s position and use was worth annexation. Because of Hawaii’s position as a potential launching point for an invasion of the Philippines, the strategic side of the annexation debate gained additional importance and the moral aspect of annexation was minimized. When the Newlands Resolution (requiring only a simple majority) went to Congress, the Senate and House both passed it;<sup>28</sup> With President McKinley’s signature, Hawaii became a US territory on July 7, 1898.<sup>29</sup> By focusing the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> “Debate on Annexation of Hawaii,” *The San Francisco Call*, June 12, 1898, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85066387/1898-06-12/ed-1/seq-3/>.

<sup>26</sup> *San Francisco Call*, “Debate on Annexation of Hawaii.”

<sup>27</sup> *San Francisco Call*, “Debate on Annexation of Hawaii.”

<sup>28</sup> National Archives and Records Administration, “1897 Petition.”

<sup>29</sup> National Archives and Records Administration, “1897 Petition.”

dispute on annexing Hawaii on the geopolitical aspect of annexation, the Spanish-American War was able to unintentionally generate the political will for the US to make Hawaii a territory.

Following Hawaii's annexation, America misrepresented Hawaii as liberated and freed under US rule in order to portray American imperialism as good and just. For example, William McKinley's belief in America's status as a defender of the people caused him to distort what actual Native Hawaiians thought about annexation. On October 13, 1898, McKinley gave a speech celebrating the annexation of Hawaii: "We settled the great question as to whether the American flag should float over Hawaii [great applause], and the flag is floating there to-day, in all its glory, over a happy and contented people, who wanted to be annexed to the US because they loved our institutions."<sup>30</sup> McKinley, speaking after annexation, described the American flag as glorious and American institutions as loved to support the narrative of America as just and benevolent. He portrayed Hawaiians as happy being annexed because if they were not, then annexing Hawaii would look less like a selfless act the US had undertaken and more like conquest; then, the US would no longer be special in its moral purity. However, this narrative of Hawaiians joyful for American annexation was a lie—a petition against annexation sent to Washington gathered 21,000 signatures from Native Hawaiians, out of a population of about 39,000 at the time.<sup>31</sup> In order to justify America being exceptional in its moral good, McKinley misrepresented how people in Hawaii felt about annexation. Later on, the United States justified annexing Hawaii by exaggerating the difference between Hawaii before and after annexation to maintain a narrative of America as a champion of democracy. A 1914 cartoon in *The Chicago*

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<sup>30</sup> William McKinley, "Speech at Ottumwa, Iowa, October 13, 1898," in *Speeches and Addresses of William McKinley: From March 1, 1897 to May 30, 1900*, (New York: Doubleday & McClureCo., 1900), 114-115.

<sup>31</sup> National Archives and Records Administration, "1897 Petition."

*Tribune* titled “What the United States has Fought For”<sup>32</sup> showed Hawaii as hunched under a huge bag labeled Industrial Slavery before annexation, and standing straight up formally and in a tuxedo after annexation, which implies that because the US annexed Hawaii, industrial slavery was eliminated. However, the truth was that annexation helped preserve the sugar plantation oligarchy responsible for industrial slavery, as now sugar planters were free to sell to the mainland under lower tariffs (therefore preserving their profits and plantations);<sup>33</sup> In fact, white landowners had previously overthrown the Hawaiian monarchy and requested annexation in order to protect their profits from new tariffs.<sup>34</sup> While the 13th Amendment abolished the contract labor system in Hawaii, it did not abolish the “Big Five” sugar monopoly<sup>35</sup> nor did it end Hawaii’s dependence on sugar production.<sup>36</sup> While annexation forced the sugar plantation system to change, it by no means destroyed it. In order to still portray themselves as the moral high ground, the US used exaggerated claims to paint an image of Hawaii as completely freed from “industrial slavery.”<sup>37</sup> Annexation was no longer a plausibility that may or may not be a moral good; it was settled policy that had to be good. In order to maintain an image of American imperialism as a benevolent force, the US exaggerated the good that annexation had done in order to portray Hawaii and its residents as happy under American rule.

In the 1890s, America had to grapple with questions of how to live up to an image of protecting justice and equality for all, while also acquiring colonies and a global empire of its

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<sup>32</sup> John T. McCutcheon, “What the United States has Fought For,” Cartoon, *The Chicago Tribune*, 1914, From Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Free\\_from\\_Spanish.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Free_from_Spanish.jpg).

<sup>33</sup>“Hawaii,” *History, Art & Archives, U.S. House of Representatives*, Office of the Historian, <https://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/APA/Historical-Essays/Exclusion-and-Empire/Hawaii/>

<sup>34</sup> *U.S. House of Representatives*, Office of the Historian, “Hawaii.”

<sup>35</sup>*U.S. House of Representatives*, Office of the Historian, “Hawaii.”

<sup>36</sup>*U.S. House of Representatives*, Office of the Historian, “Hawaii.”

<sup>37</sup> McCutcheon, “What the United States has Fought For.”

own. The debate surrounding one of the territories the nation would acquire, Hawaii, encapsulated that question; In the years between 1893 and 1898, annexation supporters emphasized how annexing Hawaii would benefit America on the geopolitical stage and insisted on the US's moral duty to do what the monarchy had seemingly failed to do. Annexation opponents pointed out the paradox of the US supposedly being a bastion of freedom while misusing its power by supporting the coup. It was the Spanish-American War in 1898 that ended the debate and led to annexation by highlighting the military benefit of Hawaii's position—afterwards, America overstated the change annexation had achieved in the island chain in order to maintain the narrative of being a bastion of freedom. From this moment onward, Hawaii became an American colony, not properly represented as part of the US until it became the 50th state in 1959.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *U.S. House of Representatives*, Office of the Historian, "Hawaii."

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## Appendix:

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### ANNEXATION OF THE HAWAIIAN ISLANDS

To the Senate:

I transmit herewith, with a view to its ratification, a treaty of annexation concluded on the 14th day of February, 1893, between John W. Foster, Secretary of State, who was duly empowered to act in that behalf on the part of the United States, and Lorrin A. Thurston, W. R. Castle, W. C. Wilder, C. L. Carter, and Joseph Marsden, the commissioners on the part of the Government of the Hawaiian Islands. The provisional treaty, it will be observed, does not attempt to deal in detail with the questions that grow out of the annexation of the Hawaiian Islands to the United States. The commissioners representing the Hawaiian Government have consented to leave to the future and to the just and benevolent purposes of the United States the adjustment of all such questions.

I do not deem it necessary to discuss at any length the conditions which have resulted in this decisive action. It has been the policy of the administration not only to respect but to encourage the continuance of an independent government in the Hawaiian Islands so long as it afforded suitable guaranties for the protection of life and property, and maintained a stability and strength that gave adequate security against the domination of any other power. The moral support of this Government has continually manifested itself in the most friendly diplomatic relations and in many acts of courtesy to the Hawaiian rulers.

The overthrow of the monarchy was not in any way promoted by this Government, but had its origin in what seems to have been a reactionary and revolutionary policy on the part of Queen Liliuokalani which put in serious peril not only the large and preponderating interests of the United States in the islands, but all foreign interests, and indeed the decent administration of civil affairs and the peace of the islands. It is quite evident that the monarchy had become effete and the Queen's government so weak and inadequate as to be the prey of designing and unscrupulous persons. The restoration of Queen Liliuokalani to her throne is undesirable, if not impossible, and unless actively supported by the United States would be accompanied by serious disaster and the disorganization of all business interests. The influence and interest of the United States in the islands must be increased and not diminished.

Only two courses are now open—one the establishment of a protectorate by the United States, and the other annexation full and complete. I think the latter course, which has been adopted in the treaty, will be highly promotive of the best interests of the Hawaiian people, and is the only one that will adequately secure the interests of the United States. These interests are not wholly selfish. It is essential that none of the other great powers shall secure these islands. Such

a possession would not consist with our safety and with the peace of the world. This view of the situation is so apparent and conclusive that no protest has been heard from any government against proceedings looking to annexation. Every foreign representative at Honolulu promptly acknowledged the Provisional Government, and I think there is a general concurrence in the opinion that the deposed Queen ought not be restored.

Prompt action upon this treaty is very desirable. If it meets the approval of the Senate, peace and good order will be secured in the islands under existing laws until such time as Congress can provide by legislation a permanent form of government for the islands. This legislation should be, and I do not doubt will be, not only just to the natives and all other residents and citizens of the islands, but should be characterized by great liberality and a high regard to the rights of all people and of all foreigners domiciled there. The correspondence which accompanies the treaty will put the Senate in possession of all the facts known to the Executive.

BENJ. HARRISON.