

# How americans were seduced by annexation of hawaii history essay



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In the title of this paper, I am making an overt reference to a recent publication of Dr. Andrew J. Bacevich, retired US Army colonel and professor of History and International Relations at Boston University. In this title, Bacevich provided a contemporary analysis of the roots of militarism in American society, and the over reliance that America places on its military capabilities when it comes to world affairs.

It may seem odd at first, but America's eponymous "militarism" and its current experiences in the current Global War on Terror have direct parallels with the US involvement in the 1893 overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom. The US involvement in the forcible removal of the Kingdom's sovereignty has been described as America's first experience with regime change.[2] In this paper, I will be documenting how Hawaii was in fact a sovereign nation within the family of nations; a status which changed with the US military's intervention in the overthrow of the existing government in 1893. I will be framing this military intervention in the context of international laws and the United States' own codes on war. In addition, the annexation of the strategically important Hawaii in the context of the impending Spanish American war will be discussed, as it has clear corollaries with the current US "oil" wars. (Just like the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, America's participation in the overthrow of Hawaii's sovereignty in 1893 brings up questions of legality regarding international law.) To begin the analysis it is useful to look at the two frames of looking at Hawaii as an entity today:

Hawaii as the 50th State

In researching this paper, I have gained a new understanding in the history of the Hawaiian Islands, which is very different from the standard narrative which is generally taught. In fact, what is clear is that there are now two distinct narratives that in play when it comes to conceptualizing Hawaii. The first is that Hawaii is the 50th state of the United States of America, having won statehood in 1959. It is an idyllic land of beaches, tiki bars and a haven for surfing and brown girls in hulu skirts. One of the main texts consulted in this research was the Russ's " The Hawaiian Revolution." This monograph was published in 1959, the year that Hawaii became a US state. This is the author's preface as it succinctly describes how America frames its conception of Hawaii:

No commercial company would touch this book because popular appeal is lacking in the pages. It is simply not the kind of book which would ever become a bestseller. Upon submitting a preliminary draft, at his request, to a reader of a New York publishing house, I received the following comment: " What the commercial market wants on Hawaii is romance. I cannot quite see how you can appropriately put out this book with a jacket showing a scantily clad brownish maiden and a blurb assuring the reader that he or she might get some pointers as to how sin thrives in Hawaii. And that is what the public wants.

[An interesting aside to this is that this institution has one copy of this book, which was acquired in 1977 and in the intervening 33 years, I am the forth individual to check this item from the library.]

Hawaii as a sovereign nation under US occupation

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In contrast to this way of looking at Hawaii, is to view Hawaii as a sovereign nation which is not a part of the United States and instead has been under illegal occupation since 1893. This is certainly not the way that Hawaii is portrayed in mainstream education and media, but does make sense of and explains the growing Hawaiian sovereignty movement. It is testament to the power and hegemony of the United States that what is in reality a colonial possession is perceived to have ceded its powers voluntarily and become a US state.

To understand this narrative of Hawaii is to understand neo-colonialism at work. The United States clearly had a renewed vigour of Manifest Destiny in the late 1800s. At this time there was a push westwards to the Pacific coast, in search of cheaper labor, land and raw materials. Native people impeding this were fought, through the Indian wars all the way to the western coast. At this time there was great interest in the vast market of China and “the Orient.” Japan was a growing imperial power. The US was gravely concerned with European colonial powers’ and the nascent Japanese colonial power’s influence on China, as this was in large part an untapped market.

#### Hawaii as a military outpost

Today Hawaii is one of the most militarized places on earth. It has tens of thousands of troops and more than 150 military installations on the island. More than a third of the land is controlled by the US military. It had become a popular retirement location for military personnel, and real estate prices are several times the national average. It is home to The United States Pacific

Command (USPACOM), which has responsibility for over half of the world's surface.

The idea of the American military base is a fundamentally symbol of power for the US. A recent count of US military installations across the globe places the number of foreign bases at over 700[3]. A US presence in Germany or the detention facilities at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba are facts of the modern world. In his recent critique of the modern American empire, Chalmers Johnson, seeing these bases as a symbol of empire, draws parallels between the current spread of mid- and large-sized US military bases with those of the British Empire and the Roman Empire at the heights of their powers. [4]Given these parallels, it is evident why the label of “ empire” has been applied to the American experience. This notion of empire changed the image of America from within and to the outside world, with the 1898 annexation of Hawaii was an important first step in the creation of this new empire.

Fundamental to the US domination of Asia was to have a military outpost far out in the Pacific. In John Huston's WWII documentary “ Report from the Aleutians” he shows a map that illustrates how the Aleutian Islands and the Hawaiian islands were the two strategic outposts from which the Pacific coast of the United States was protected.[5]In essence the strategy was to establish naval superiority – by bringing the war to them, and have these outposts operating as vanguards against attack.

Ernest May emphasizes the shift in America's foreign policy when it came to the Hawaii question by comparing views expressed about Hawaii with those expressed twenty-odd years earlier about the Dominican republic:

“ As of 1870 they had still seen the United States as an experiment: the only consequential nation without a monarch and a privileged aristocracy, and the only one that attempted to reconcile national and local interests by means of a federal system.”[6]

Central to the debates and discourse that occurred around the 1890s was the Monroe Doctrine from several decades earlier. By the 1890s The Monroe Doctrine of 1823 seemed to offer justification for actions taken involving Hawaii, Cuba, The Philippines, China and Central and South America.

Ultimately, the Spanish-American war of 1898 was an important focal point that sharpened attitudes towards how America should approach her role within the wider world. To understand this, it is useful to revisit the Monroe Doctrine of over half a century earlier and to explain why it became so important at the close of the century. The Monroe Doctrine was declared in a few paragraphs of President James Monroe's seventh annual message to Congress on December 2, 1823. Monroe warned European countries not to interfere in the Western Hemisphere, stating “ that the American continents... are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers.”[7]This made clear to the rest of the world that any such colonization would amount to an act of aggression and would be responded to with force.

The Monroe Doctrine thus became the foundation of future U. S. foreign policy, and it set out to separate the “ New World” from the “ Old World.” Although this Doctrine met with tacit approval from Great Britain, it was not initially taken as seriously as it would be later in the century due to the image at the time of America’s weak naval power.

Alongside the resurgent interest in the Monroe Doctrine, there also was a movement towards a new Manifest Destiny – a phrase normally ascribed to an earlier period of westward territorial expansion. American historian and philosopher John Fiske wrote an influential article in 1885, published in Harper’s magazine entitled “ A New Manifest Destiny.” Referring to “ the frontier against barbarism” Fiske’s piece – which advocated Christianizing and civilizing the barbarians – was rapturously received by audiences at the time, on the lecture circuit.[8]

It is interesting to contrast Fiske’s optimistic and expansionist world-view with the prevailing traditionalist American sentiment of isolationism. A prime example of this was in the US restrained response to “ The Chilean Controversy” of 1891. In late 1891 two US sailors on shore leave from the cruiser USS Baltimore in the Chilean port of Valparaíso were killed by rebels (who later would form the new post revolution government.) Despite registering his indignation at the attack, President Harrison remained non-confrontational. Responding to this diplomatic incident he states in an internal memo:

“ It has been my desire in every way to cultivate friendly and intimate relationships with all the Governments of this hemisphere. We do not covet their territory.”[9]

President McKinley’s future Secretary of State John Sherman in ’95 echoed these sentiments when he wrote that he hopes “ that our people will be content with internal growth, and avoid the complications of foreign acquisitions.”[10]

It is in the context of the above tensions between the expansionist and traditionalist mindsets that Hawaii and its intertwinement with the United States came about. The background to the US involvement in Hawaii began with trade treaties cementing a relationship going back a half century based on missionaries and whaling fleets[11]. In return for the United States permitting Hawaiian sugar to enter the American market freely, the Hawaiian government agreed not to lease or dispose of any of its territory to any other power. It also led to the granting to the US of a naval base at Pearl Harbor. Interestingly the Treaty explicitly acknowledged Hawaii as a sovereign state. Overall, however, the effect of this treaty was to dilute the country’s independence and make her dependent on the United States.

At this point Hawaii was a sovereign independent state – the Hawaiian Kingdom – and was governed under a single ruler (King David Kalākaua.) It had international recognition and had entered into treaties and conventions with the nations of Austria, Belgium, Bremen (presently Germany), Denmark, France, Germany, Hamburg (presently Germany), Italy, Hong Kong (former colony of England), Japan, Netherlands, New South Wales (former colony of



England), Portugal, Russia, Samoa, the Swiss Confederation, Sweden, Norway, Tahiti (colony of France), United Kingdom, and the United States of America.[12]In 1887, the King was forced to promulgate a new constitution which would drastically reduce his powers and transfer the balance of power to the American, European and Hawaiian elite on the islands. It changed the voting rights of the population and disenfranchised Asians from voting. This came to be known as the “ Bayonet Constitution” as a result of the King being under threat of being deposed by the armed militia and politicians representing the elite – what came to be known as the Reform Party. This Party favored annexation with the United States.

In the end this led to the permanent cession of Pearl Harbor and its surrounds to the United States. This experience of having a naval military installation in a foreign territory or host country was to be the blueprint for the future expansion of the American Empire.

This uneasy alliance continued until 1893 when Queen Lili‘uokalani, sister of the King ascended to the throne and went about drafting a new constitution which would restore the monarchy’s powers. As a reaction to this, elite mostly American residents on the island created a “ Committee of Safety” which had for its purpose the removal of the Queen, and ultimately to cede to the United States through annexation. A provisional government was assembled and a coup d’état took place aided in large part by the presence in Hawaii of a detachment of uniformed US marines who came aboard from their cruiser, the USS Boston which was in Honolulu Harbor at the time. The presence of these armed US soldiered – who were there

ostensible in a neutral capacity to protect US citizens in Hawaii – was  
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sufficiently intimidating for the Queen to surrender, leading to the abolition of the monarchy.

What is particularly interesting about this whole episode and ensuing controversy is that it marked a period of introspection and conspicuous concern for the image that America was projecting to the world. President Harrison had favored annexation but when President Cleveland assumed office again in 1893 for his second term (the first term being directly before Harrison) he strongly opposed annexation on moral grounds. In a message to Congress dated December 18, 1893 he states that “ all things relating to the transaction (the treaty of annexation of Hawaii) should be clear and free from suspicion.” He conceded in the same message that “ the Provisional Government (of Hawaii) owes its existence to an armed invasion by the United States.” The tone of this message makes it clear that President Cleveland thought the annexation of the islands to be unconscionable and would impugn the American people and the image of the country internationally.[13]In fact President Cleveland ordered an investigation into the overthrow by former Congressman James Henderson Blount. It was concluded by Blount in 1893 that the “ United States diplomatic and military representatives had abused their authority and were responsible for the change in government.” However, a U. S. Congressional investigation under Senator John Tyler Morgan into the overthrow, one year later cleared the US military of wrongdoing.[14]At this point Cleveland changed his position, recognizing the Provisional Government and the nascent Republic of Hawaii.

The United States had failed to annex the Hawaiian Islands by treaty. The Hawaiian question remained, and continued to be debated. It could be said <https://assignbuster.com/how-americans-were-seduced-by-annexation-of-hawaii-history-essay/>

that at this point America had to position itself internationally, wrestling with ideas between its traditional moral repugnance at the idea of colonial interference and a growing notion that it “ should take all outlying territory necessary to (its) own defense.”[15]That last quotation is attributed to the very influential Henry Cabot Lodge speaking to the US Senate in 1895. In this speech he forewarned of Japanese encroachment of the islands which would cause a threat to the United States.[16]

Lorrin A. Thurston, leader of the 1893 coup, further pushed the cause for annexation by emphasizing the Japanese threat. He circulated a pamphlet[17]in 1897 warning of Japanese immigration to Hawaii and the threat that the huge numbers of arrivals to the islands would pose.

Eventually they would be dominant in numbers and being an “ energetic, ambition, warlike and progressive people” would pose a serious threat.

Walter LaFeber summed up the years leading up to this writing:

“ Jingoistic congressmen, expansionist-minded naval officers, and militant-minded newspaper editors frequently attempted to conjure up the specter of British, Japanese, or even Russian control of these islands.”[18]

The following year in 1898 the new President McKinley was in favor of a Treaty of Annexation, but this failed in the Senate. A congressional joint resolution was obtained this year, and on the authority of this joint resolution Hawaii was annexed, becoming a US territory officially in 1900. This was an important turning point, as effectively this was the first instance of the new American Imperialism. It is also important in that the basis for the annexation was not a treaty but rather a joint resolution (even a treaty of

cession by the self-imposed government officials of the Bayonet Constitution would be suspect.) To compare this with today, the United States had as much right to annex Hawaii in 1898 as it has today to annex Iraq or Afghanistan.

This is a fundamental point at the heart of the issue – the overthrow was illegal under international law. But in the context of the Islands’ use as an outpost during the 1898 Spanish American war, that is what happened. In his doctoral dissertation on the issue, Dr. Keanu Sai writes “ Congress could no more annex the Hawaiian Islands in 1898 as a matter of military necessity during the Spanish American war than it could annex Afghanistan today as a matter of military necessity during the American war on terrorism.”[19]Dr. Sai, who himself served as a US Army officer, gave an example of how America’s involvement in the Hawaiian overthrow would be perceived now. He explained how if he landed in South Korea as a US Army officer without a status of forces agreement or consent by that government, it would be an act of war.[20]When the US Marines came ashore in 1898 wielding Gatling guns and Howitzers to protect the insurgents, this was thus an act of war.

Military occupation is currently regulated by the Hague and Geneva Conventions, and US Army Field Manual 27-10. Section 358 of this manual states:

#### Occupation Does Not Transfer Sovereignty:

Being an incident of war, military occupation confers upon the invading force the means of exercising control for the period of occupation. It does not transfer the sovereignty to the occupant, but simply the authority or power

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to exercise some of the rights of sovereignty. The exercise of these rights results from the established power of the occupant and from the necessity of maintaining law and order, indispensable both to the inhabitants and to the occupying force.

Section 369 of the same field manual entitled “ Local Law and New Legislation” states that “ the penal laws of the occupied territory shall remain in force.” It is for this reason that in the current War on Terror US lieutenants can be seen to be acting in temporarily municipal capacities as Afghani town mayors etc. Clearly neither of the above regulations was observed by the US in Hawaii.

The political crisis of the Spanish American war provided the motive and the opportunity to annex Hawaii. From this point onward the military buildup in Hawaii took off in earnest. To keep the war outside the continental US and to protect shipping posts, a large navy was to be created with naval outposts at Hawaii, Guam, Subic Bay and Pago Pago in Samoa. By attaining Hawaii unlawfully, the US has demonstrated that military, economic and political motives came first.

Hawaii did indeed continue to prove to be the strategically valuable military outpost that it was presented as in the 1890s. At no time more so than during WWII. The war was fundamentally a global war between different colonial powers about who gets to control what. After the war ended, the United Nations was set up and charged with tackling the question of colonialism itself. The 1950s saw a wave of colonialist movements and clearly the US began to see Hawaii as being in danger of falling outside of

the US sphere of influence. Statehood was voted upon in 1959 and Hawaii's ties to the US were formalized. At this time the minority of the population were Hawaiians whose sovereignty had been taken away, and the vote was passed by the very people who benefited from the illegal regime change. These people were the settlers from the US, the Asian laborers they had brought to the Islands and US military personnel stationed and living there.

Clearly the interests of the native Hawaiians was placed at the forefront in this vote for statehood (a concept the UN refers to as a duty of " sacred trust.") The ballot for statehood gave the whole experience the veneer of democracy. Article Six of the United States Constitution makes treaties made by the US a part of the supreme law of the land, the constitution. As a signatory to the United Nations and by acting in contravention of its codes, the US was thereby violating both international and domestic (constitutional) law, in order to further its military and strategic aims.

In his (of the time) groundbreaking work " The Tragedy of American Diplomacy", William Appleman Williams shoes how America has used " informal empire" to influence and shape weaker states into an American political and economic mold. At the time of publication, Appleman Williams in his conclusion chapter references the then ongoing Vietnam war and he draws parallels with this and the way the United States acted in the past (Hawaii and the expansionism era of the 1890s.) It is interesting to now be able to draw parallels with the Bush Doctrine as evidenced in the " Global War on Terror."

Williams comments on the “ Open Door” policy for foreign expansionism which helped America out of the slump of 1893 (in essence, the scramble for China.) This foreign policy advanced by U. S. Secretary of State John Hay allowed imperial powers to equally access the Chinese market, without in fact colonizing it. (It was a great fear of the U. S. that China would be colonized thereby threatening U. S. commercial interests.) He provided a revisionist interpretation of the debates occurring in the 1890s: at the time it was imperialist vs. anti-imperialist – Williams shifts this analysis to colonialist vs. anti-colonialist. This analysis provides us with further proof that the American experiment differed in substantial ways from the colonial empires of the “ Old World.” His analysis also questions the then pervading narrative of America’s altruistic exceptionalism as being the primary driver in entering into foreign wars. Again, parallels can be drawn between more recent US “ Oil” wars. In an interesting contemporary development on the Hawaii situation, President Clinton in 1993 (100 years after the overthrow) signed a congressional joint resolution into law, known as the “ Apology Resolution”. It “ acknowledges that the overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawaii occurred with the active participation of agents and citizens of the United States and further acknowledges that the Native Hawaiian people never directly relinquished to the United States their claims to their inherent sovereignty as a people over their national lands, either through the Kingdom of Hawaii or through a plebiscite or referendum”[21]

To conclude, it is evident that a marked shift in occurred in the American foreign policy and militarism in the 1890s, culminating in the Spanish-

American war. America’s approach to the Hawaii situation and the ultimate  
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annexation of the islands was a turning point, and was clearly the first real evidence of the new American empire. I have reviewed debates and accounts from the time and later, influential revisionist writers such as Appleman Williams who makes comparisons to the then current Vietnam situation. I have reviewed and discussed recent literature from critics of current U. S. wars and drawn comparisons between Hawaii in 1898 and current conflicts over 100 years later. The conclusion is that although the symbol or form of empire is different – it is still there.