OVERTHROW OF THE HAWAIIAN MONARCHY
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Introduction

The Hawaiian Islands’ warm weather and beautiful scenery make it a popular destination for vacations, weddings, or retirement. However, Hawaiʻi is more than lūʻaus (Hawaiian term for a feast) and coconut trees. It has a rich history that involves tragedy and corruption. Unlike the other forty-nine states, Hawaiʻi was not a territory of a larger nation; Hawaiʻi belonged to its people. It was home for a small but proud indigenous people. These eight islands once untouched by the outside world became a melting pot of different cultures due to the ideal climate and location. With time Hawaiʻi grew into a peaceful kingdom that thrived.

This paper will discuss the events leading to the overthrow and the affairs of the coup d’état. It will describe the reign of Hawaii’s last two ruling monarchs. Finally, it will describe the changes that occurred following the overthrow.

Reign of King Kalākaua

Since 1840, Hawaiʻi was a constitutional monarchy. The legislature was separated into two bodies: a house of representatives which was appointed by the people and a house of nobles. The judiciary system was a supreme court that consisted of the king (or queen), prime minister, and four others chosen by the house of representatives (Handbook 6). Hawaiʻi was recognized internationally as a nation-state (“Ke Ala”). During the early 1870s, the current king, Lunalilo wanted his successor to be chosen by the people; therefore, he refused to name an heir. Since he did not have a successor prior to his death, the new ruler was to be elected. In 1874 by the popular vote, David Kalākaua was elected King over Queen Emma wife of Kamehameha IV (Kamehilo 3).

Reciprocity Treaty

In 1875, the Reciprocity Treaty was signed allowing free trade between the United States and Hawaiʻi (Grandy 161). The treaty gave land to the US government and restricted the King from granting foreign access to ports, harbors, or any territory for the duration of the treaty (Grandy 168). Since the treaty allowed trading between the United States and Hawaiʻi, it opened lucrative business opportunities for American plantation owners.

This treaty created an economic dependence on the US and furthered America’s control in Hawaiʻi. When the treaty approached expiration, America would have the negotiation advantage and seek better terms while Hawaiʻi would need to meet their demands (Grandy 161). The Treaty of Reciprocity was a catalyst for the overthrow as it allowed foreigners to gain land, resources, and power.
Bayonet Constitution

The Hawaiian League, a secret organization of four hundred members who wanted to reform the Hawaiian kingdom (Kamehiro 128), was under the direction of thirteen members called the “Committee of Safety.” This committee’s motive was to establish their authority while weakening the king’s power. In order to secure King Kalākaua’s compliance to their demands, the Hawaiian League shipped in firearms—approximately nine hundred rifles and ammunition—and took control of the Honolulu Rifles, a volunteer militia (Kuykendall 350).

The Hawaiian League drafted a constitution that greatly restricted the executive authority of the king by requiring the Cabinet’s approval for all decisions (Kamehiro 129). The sovereign’s position was reduced to a mere figurehead, since the Cabinet held the executive power. While the King retained the power to appoint Cabinet members, he could not dismiss members without a majority vote from the legislature. Nobles in the legislature were no longer appointed by the king. Instead, individuals who met the income and land ownership requirements were elected (Kuykendall 369). The new constitution changed the voting rights as voter qualification depended on income, land ownership, literacy (in either Hawaiian or any European language), and residency. This change allowed noncitizens to vote yet excluded Asian immigrants from voting (Kamehiro 129). The constitution became known as the “Bayonet Constitution,” for the threat of armed forces of the Hawaiian League and Honolulu Rifles forced King Kalākaua to sign.

Reign of Queen Liliʻuokalani

King Kalākaua did not have any biological children and had not named a successor. Therefore, after the King’s death and the Cabinet’s insistence, his sister Liliʻuokalani became Queen with an oath of office in 1891 (Potter 153). On January 14, 1893, Queen Liliʻuokalani advocated a new constitution to restore executive power to the monarch and to restore Native Hawaiian rights (Kamehiro 129). This constitution would allow cabinet members dismissal with the legislature’s approval and change voter qualification to those of Native Hawaiian birth and naturalized citizens (Handbook 11).

Coup d’état

Threatened by the Queen’s potential constitution, the Hawaiian League’s “Committee of Safety” convened to stage a coup d’état. Sharing a common interest in Hawaiian annexation, the Committee of Safety plotted with US Minister John Stevens (Handbook 11). With John Stevens’ aid, several hundred US Marine troops landed in Hawaiʻi under the guise that they were protecting American lives and property (Grandy 185).
Kingdom is yielded

On January 16, 1893, Queen Liliʻuokalani was arrested and imprisoned; ‘Iolani Palace, which was the royal home of the Hawaiian rulers, was seized and ransacked without a warrant (Liliʻuokalani 268-272). Supported by the troops, the committee was able to occupy Aliʻiolani Hale (the government building), declare martial law, and demand the Queen to surrender. A provisional government was set up to facilitate annexation to the United States (Kamehiro 129). Under protest, Queen Liliʻuokalani was forced to yield her authority to the United States government.

Events after the Overthrow

Following the overthrow, the decisions made by the usurpers benefitted those in power while oppressing Native Hawaiians and immigrants (Howes 85). After the Native Hawaiians lost their voice and power, they continued their efforts to restore the kingdom. However, the efforts of a weaker minority proved to be futile against those who occupied the provisional government. The support of the United States government proved to be a powerful device that transformed Hawaiʻi completely.

Pre-annexation

Under the Republic’s new constitution, Native Hawaiian and Asian voting rights remained restricted, and Crown Lands became the property of the government (Kamehiro 75). On July 4, 1894, the Provisional Government declared themselves to be the “Republic of Hawaii” (“Ke Ala”). Countries that had formerly acknowledged Hawaiʻi as an independent nation-state such as Great Britain, the United States, and Germany now formally recognized Hawaiʻi as a Republic (“Ke Ala”).

1895 Wilcox Rebellion

Many people who remained loyal to Queen Liliʻuokalani and the Hawaiian kingdom grew frustrated and restless. In January 1895, royalist groups organized a counterrevolution to regain control of the government (Handbook 13). Led by Robert Wilcox, this group managed to gather firearms and ammunition by shipments from the mainland and inter-island transports. A skirmish broke out between royalists and provisional government police, which resulted in the death of an officer and several injuries. In response to the uprising, martial law was declared, and twelve hundred US troops were armed (Krout 11). In vain, the royalists continued their battles; however, due to poor organization and lack of resources, within two weeks the royalist movement was suppressed and over two hundred people were arrested (Handbook 13).
Imprisonment of Queen Liliʻuokalani

The royalist rebellion was a military failure that had heavy consequences. Queen Liliʻuokalani, as well as the two highest ranking nobles, Prince David Kawananakoa, and Prince Jonah Kalanianaʻole, were arrested in suspicion for their involvement in the rebellion (Handbook 13). Many of the royals’ advisors, officers, and other loyal subjects were also imprisoned. During this time, the Republic of Hawaiʻi demanded the Queen to abdicate. They threatened to kill six prominent citizens if she did not comply. Under duress, Queen Liliʻuokalani was forced to formally abdicate. To further her humiliation, the jailers instructed Queen Liliʻuokalani to sign as “Liliʻuokalani Dominis” the surname of her husband (Liliʻuokalani 276).

After signing the act of abdication, while some were released the Queen remained imprisoned. She was accused and convicted of “misprision of treason” or the concealing of one’s knowledge of a treasonous act. Her sentence was five years of hard-labor imprisonment and a fine of $5,000 (Liliʻuokalani 278). This initial sentence was passed as a show of power to intimidate the Native Hawaiians and humiliate the Queen. Later, the sentence was reduced to five years imprisonment in 'Iolani Palace, her home while she was Queen (Kualapai 42).

While Queen Liliʻuokalani was a prisoner in her own palace, she was denied visitors, newspapers, and literature (Liliʻuokalani 289). She wrote and composed a plethora of songs such as “Aloha ʻOe” and “The Queen’s Prayer (Ke Aloha O Ka Haku).” In fear that she would never leave the palace walls, she translated the “Kumulipo,” the Hawaiian chant of genealogy and creation, in hopes to share the Hawaiian heritage with the world (Liliʻuokalani 290). Queen Liliʻuokalani spent eight months confined in the upper apartment of 'Iolani Palace before she was removed to Washington Place, her residence in Honolulu prior to becoming queen, and placed under house arrest (Kualapai 42). After serving nearly two years of her imprisonment sentence, the Republic of Hawaiʻi pardoned the Queen and restored her civil rights (Kualapai 42).

In 1896, the Republic passed a law that declared English to be the only language used in public and private schools. Any school that did not comply was no longer recognized and stripped of government funding. The Hawaiian language was outlawed as a medium of education (Howes). This Hawaiian language ban was not just limited to classrooms but all school property. There were serious consequences for those who did not adhere to this law. For example, teachers who were caught singing in Hawaiian were threatened with dismissal (Howes).

Annexation

When US President William McKinley came into office in 1897, his administration negotiated an annexation treaty with the Republic of Hawaii. Native Hawaiians and the people of Hawaiʻi had strongly opposed annexation. They presented petitions to the US Senate protesting annexation and calling for the restoration of the monarchy (see Figure 1). In acknowledgment of the Hawaiian citizens’ opposition, the US Senate rejected McKinley’s annexation treaty (“Ke Ala”).
The Spanish-American War served as a catalyst that provided the final push for annexation. Having a permanent military base at Pearl Harbor would be advantageous for its ideal location. Under the US Constitution, territorial annexation must be acquired through a two-thirds US Senate majority. Since the US Senate did not ratify the treaty, pro-annexationists drafted a joint resolution to facilitate annexation; thus, violating the constitution (Kamehiro 77). With merely a House majority Hawai‘i, was annexed into the United States (see Figure 2). Under this joint resolution called the Newlands Resolution, all public, government, and Crown land were ceded and transferred to the United States (“Joint Resolution” 1899).
Figure 2. During the annexation ceremony at 'Iolani Palace the Hawaiian flag was lowered and replaced with an American Flag. “Native Hawaiians Oppose U.S. Annexation - Timeline - Native Voices.” U.S. National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health, www.nlm.nih.gov/nativevoices/timeline/390.html.

Statehood

After World War II, Hawai‘i was listed as a non-self-governing territory by the United Nations. According to the UN charter, for the territory of Hawai‘i to become a state of the US, a plebiscite must be held. In this plebiscite, the residents would vote on whether their territory should become a part of the trustee nation (the United States), remain a territory, or become independent (Territories 1947). However, when the Hawaiian plebiscite was held, only American citizens could vote. Thus, it excluded immigrants and Native Hawaiians who refused to become American citizens. The United States further violated international law by omitting the option of independence from the plebiscite ballot. This limited the people’s choices to either remain a territory or become a state. Consequently, in 1959, Hawai‘i became the 50th state in the US (Schachter 12).
Summary

The overthrow was a pivotal point that forever changed Hawaiian culture and history. It was the ending of Hawaii’s independence as their monarchs were forced to surrender the kingdom. The voice of Native Hawaiians was silenced, and Hawai‘i became controlled by foreigners. Despite the opposition, America obtained its fiftieth state. It was not until the centennial anniversary of the overthrow that the United States acknowledged and apologized to the Native Hawaiian people (Apology Resolution 1993). While a late apology does not reverse the damage done, it can bring closure to some and inspire future generations to move forward.
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