

Chapter 10

STATEHOOD

The political power of the Big Five was not able to withstand the winds of change that were blowing through Hawai`i following the conclusion of the Second World War. Like African-American war heroes returning from the war who pushed to civil rights movement into high gear when they refused to accept their former roles, the returning Hawaiians were no longer willing to settle for second class citizenship.

Like veterans throughout the United States, many of the returning nisei went to college on the GI Bill. The fields of law, medicine, and teaching were particularly attractive to the Hawaiian veterans. A young man of great ambition who came to represent the hopes and dreams of the returning nisei was Dan Inouye. He had lost his arm in the fighting in Europe and returned home with a chest full of medals, a true hero. After the war he received his law degree from George Washington University and returned to Hawai`i where he became a key player in the evolving political scene. He was elected to the territorial House of Representatives and became the majority leader when the Democrats swept to power in 1955. He was the first AJA to be elected to the US House of Representatives in 1959, when Hawai`i had its first election after statehood. He has since been elected to the US Senate where he still maintains his seat as the senior Senator from Hawai`i.

Two major players arose to fight for control of the Democratic party in Hawai`i for several years. The first was Jack Hall, the head of the ILWU, who you have already met in the chapter on labor. The long history of organized labor's ties to the Democratic party would set Hall up as a natural key player as the party rose to power. His supposed links to the Communist party, though they garnered major headlines in Hawaiian newspapers, did little to dim his popularity. His opponent for control of the party was Jack Burns. Burns came up through the ranks of the party over the years. He was a detective in the Honolulu police department and thus was no stranger to the less affluent population of O`ahu. His ties with "the street" were a great value to him throughout his political tenure. He was known as a champion of the common man, whereas Hall's base was almost exclusively in organized labor. Burns developed particularly strong ties within Honolulu's Chinese and Japanese districts. After the war he was the first to capitalize on the emerging political power of Americans of Chinese and

Japanese ancestry. He took many of the young Japanese seeking office such as Dan Inouye and Patsy Mink under his wing and helped them to launch their careers. This created a loyal group of followers as he began his bid to gain control of the Democratic party. Burns and Hall both tried to gain control of the 1948 state Democratic Convention. Neither man was able to garner a majority of delegates but collectively they were able to unseat the “old guard” of the party. Both men were wise enough to recognize that nothing was to be gained by undermining the constituency of the other. A coalition was formed without a clear leader. However, at the '52 convention Burns gained control, with the shifting support of organized labor, and Hall refocused his energies on labor concerns, remaining a strong behind-the-scenes player in Hawaiian politics for years to come.

The now unified Democratic party took on the Republicans who had held a virtual monopoly on governmental power in Hawai`i since annexation. The elections of 1954 were the turning point. Democrats won two-thirds of the seats in the House of the territorial legislature and almost as large of a percentage in the Senate. They have held similar or larger majorities in almost every legislature up to the present day. It was during this same decade of the 50's that the issue of Statehood would finally be resolved. When Hawai`i was annexed in 1898 it was never assured future statehood. No offshore territory had ever been granted statehood. Some said that Hawai`i would challenge the “Western traditions” of the United States. Early in his political career, Strom Thurmond of South Carolina stated, “the U.S. is the maximum development of Western culture – at the opposite extreme is Eastern culture which is dominant in Hawai`i”. He then quoted Kipling, “East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet”. Some Southern congressmen stated that Hawai`i was populated by individuals of dubious ethnic stock. They surmised, and not incorrectly, that congressmen from Hawai`i would be liberal, particularly in matters of racial affairs.

Hawai`i created a Statehood Commission to keep the push for statehood on the agenda in Washington. Some of the facts that they presented in the early 50's are as follows. Hawai`i paid more taxes to the U.S. government than nine existing states, yet had no voice in how the money was spent. The population at this time was half a million, which was more than four existing states. Hawai`i had a larger population than any territory except Oklahoma at the time of statehood. Nine out of ten residents of the Islands were citizens – to counter the Asian influence argument. Almost every major power group in Hawai`i was in favor of statehood. In the first election in which the Hawaiian citizens voted on

the issue in 1940, voters favored statehood by a margin of three to one. Some of those opposed to statehood were native Hawaiians who contended that the monarchy had been illegally overthrown and therefore they desired no closer links with the United States.

On the U.S. mainland a poll in 1946 showed that six out of ten were in favor of statehood for Hawai'i. By 1954 this majority had risen to 78%. Every Hawaiian delegate to the U.S. Congress since 1936 had introduced statehood resolutions to the Congress. When Jack Burns was elected as delegate to Congress for the first time in 1948, the number one item on his agenda was statehood. He crafted and lobbied for countless statehood bills. As with many other issues the admission of Hawai'i as a state took on partisan overtones. It was clear to Republicans in Congress that Hawai'i would tend to elect Democrats to Congress, and it was a correct assumption as almost every Hawaiian Senator and Representative in the House has been a Democrat during the 40 years since statehood. Indeed the overwhelming success of the party in Hawai'i in the early 50's was a force which proved detrimental to the fight for statehood. Southern Democrats in both houses of Congress were prime opponents of statehood, as they had been opponents of annexation 60 years earlier. Any diehard segregationist was correct in opposing Hawai'i, as the Hawaiian delegation after statehood was one of the prime supporters of subsequent civil rights legislation in the 1960's. Hawai'i's Congressional delegation has become famous as being progressive on many social issues and not just civil rights.

In the second half of the 1950's a rivalry developed between Alaska and Hawai'i in a virtual race for statehood. There were several similarities between the two territories. Both were not connected directly to the contiguous 4 states, and both territories had large numbers of non-white residents. Delegations from both territories quickly realized that if the other territory were admitted to statehood first it would place increased pressure on Washington to admit the second. It was decided that Hawai'i would not stand in the way of Alaska's being first, and the two territories joined ranks and shared common lobbying strategies.

Under continued pressure Southern Democrats began to soften their position, and Hawai'i's strategic military position appealed to some mainland Republicans. The House of Representatives was the first to pass a statehood bill in February of 1959. The Senate followed with a similar bill on March 11th. President Eisenhower, a longstanding supporter of statehood for Hawai'i, signed the legislation on March 18, 1959.

Now all that was needed was for the citizens of Hawai`i to ratify these congressional votes. A special election was held on June 27. Hawaiians ratified statehood by a margin of 17 to 1. The only precinct voting against statehood was the small island of Ni`ihau, which was composed entirely of native Hawaiians. Hawai`i became the 50th state amid widespread partying in the new Aloha State.

The first matter to be resolved was the composition of Hawai`i's delegation to Congress and the election of a governor. Special elections were held in the Fall. It surprised no one when Dan Inouye won election to Hawai`i's single seat in the House of Representatives. What surprised some was that Jack Burns did not run for the Senate but decided to stay in Hawai`i and join the race for Governor. More surprising yet was his defeat by Republican William Quinn, a former territorial Governor. Burns was to get his revenge, however, as he defeated Quinn in 1962 and served a total of three terms as Governor.