

‘Onipa‘a ka ‘Oia‘i‘o

The Truth is Steadfast

It was Sir Winston Churchill who said, “History will be kind to me for I intend to write it” and as not only Great Britain’s Prime Minister for nearly ten years but also a Nobel Prize winning author, he may have been perfectly placed to make such a claim. However, as earlier British administrations had underestimated the power of resistance in the colonies, Churchill, it seems, might have been underestimating the power of the truth.

Many opponents of programs dedicated to Kānaka Maoli have long employed the tactic of playing with history and counting on a busy public to accept the manipulated “facts” that they recite. Often these “facts” are just plain inaccurate, but sometimes real numbers are used with misleading or vague commentary in order to lead to an untrue conclusion. It has become a matter of what’s left out that’s telling, what isn’t said.

One of these oft-printed manipulations of fact¹ was recently repeated in the halls of the United States Senate and became part of the congressional record. On 7 June, 2006 Senator Lamar Alexander from Tennessee gave testimony where he stated:

*Hawaiians are Americans. They became U.S. citizens in 1900. They have saluted the American flag, paid American taxes, fought in American wars. In 1959, 94 percent of Hawaiians reaffirmed that commitment to become Americans by voting to become a State.*² (my emphasis)

There are a number of problems with this “fact”. Firstly, the Senator claims that ninety four percent of “Hawaiians” voted for statehood. His inappropriately specific use of the

¹ The Grassroots Institute of Hawaii attempts to provide the “proof” of the later statement in their “document” section by having a copy of the actual vote tally on their website. The number of votes was not in question; the truth of their statement however, was and is.

Also, the group “Aloha for All” repeats the claim on their website that citizens of Hawai‘i “voted over 94% yes” which is untrue and without context.

² Congressional Record-Senate. June 7, 2006.

term Hawaiian leads many to believe that ninety-four percent of Native Hawaiians took this stance. Since it is primarily Native people in Hawai‘i who are demanding self-government, it is their opinion about statehood at the time of the vote that matters in this context, not all residents of Hawai‘i.

If the speaker did mean to refer to those residing in Hawai‘i at the time of the vote, his claim is still false. Nowhere near ninety-four percent of those people voted for statehood. To take part in this referendum you needed to be registered to vote. That means those that weren’t, didn’t. You needed to be of age to vote. The voting age in the territory was twenty years old.³ That means that every “Hawaiian” under twenty one isn’t part of this number. U.S. military and also those who had been residing in the Territory of Hawai‘i for one year were included.

The actual numbers of that election are readily available to anyone. On 27 June 1959, 132,773 registered voters cast their votes to pass Proposition 1⁴ which asked “Shall Hawaii immediately be admitted into the Union as a State”⁵ ... The 1960 census for the state of Hawai‘i lists 642,000 people living in Hawai‘i.⁶ That means that approximately 20.7 percent of Hawaii’s residents made some kind of statement approving statehood. This is a far different understanding of what happened than what was brought to our attention by these aforementioned claims. But even more important, what was that statement that they were making?

The Senator from Tennessee, and many others before him seem to feel comfortable imparting motive to the “Hawaiians” who cast these ballots. A more

³ Revised Statutes for Territory of Hawaii 1955. Chapter 330.1.

⁴ Official tabulation. Results of votes cast, three propositions, Territory of Hawaii, held Saturday, June 27, 1959. Office of the Secretary of Hawaii.

⁵ as above

⁶ United States Bureau of the Census. 1960.

inclusive review sheds light on any claims made about this period. As Senator Alexander states in his claim Hawaiians had indeed, “paid American taxes”⁷. In the year prior to the vote on statehood, “Hawaiians” paid 167 million dollars in federal taxes,⁸ an amount that surpassed ten other states. In return for this the residents of Hawai‘i did not possess the full array of rights due other citizens of the United States. “Hawaiians” living in the territory, had no choice in the governor who ruled them. The governor of the territory was appointed by the President of the United States. As the Supreme Court Justices were also being appointed; this meant that two of the three branches of power (executive and judicial) were not answerable to the voter. That’s called taxation without representation, and many “Hawaiians” were distinctly aware of their lack of power. But people in Hawai‘i were also limited in their options regarding statehood in 1959 because the ballot presented only two choices: continuing as second-class citizens in the American system, or having all of the same rights as Americans in the United States. It is impossible to know what the results might have been if restoration of independence had been an alternative on that ballot, and it is interesting, in that the U.S. did not think that it should make that choice available in light of their responsibilities to do so as U.N. appointed trustees for the non-self-governing territory of Hawai‘i.⁹

“Hawaiians” experienced martial law and military rule during and after World War II. This and many other issues brought clarity for many as to the need for stronger representation at home. Ogilvie Little reminds us that,

As a territory, Hawai‘i was under the constitutional control of Congress, which could at any time abolish the Territorial legislature and local government to place

⁷ Congressional Record-Senate. June 7, 2006.

⁸ Ogilvie-Little, Ruth.1963. *Opposition to Statehood for Hawaii: A study in the process.*

⁹ United Nations Charter. Chapter XI.Declaration Regarding Non Self-Governing Territories. Article 73

the islands under a resident commander, as in the Philippines, or under a Navy commander as in Guam or Samoa.¹⁰

Yes, a large portion of the people who voted in the statehood referendum chose statehood for Hawai'i. Having a more honest picture about the history and context of that decision sheds light on our understanding that vote.

'Onipa'a ka 'Oia'i'o.

Na,
Ronald Williams Jr.

¹⁰ Ogilie-Little, Ruth.1963. *Opposition to Statehood for Hawaii: A study in the process*.p.26.