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Reassessing the American Annexation of Hawai'i

William Michael Morgan's *Pacific Gibraltar: U.S.-Japanese Rivalry over the Annexation of Hawai'i, 1885-1898* is a welcome addition to the literature on the controversial 1898 American acquisition of the islands that held "the only protected harbor in the North Pacific" (4). While acknowledging and underscoring the economic and ideological motivations behind the annexation of the central Pacific archipelago, Morgan argues that "even more important on the U.S. side was a new and enhanced appreciation for Hawai'i's strategic value that emerged from the revolution in naval technology and strategy in the final two decades of the century" (4). In developing that argument, Morgan explores how those evolving U.S. motivations intersected with the changing dynamics of Hawai'ian politics and society in the context of an increasingly assertive Japan with its own designs on the islands. The result was a coalescing of American support around annexation in 1898 when just five years earlier such support was lacking. A Professor of Strategic Studies at the Marines Corps War College, Morgan is a retired foreign service officer and holds a Ph.D. from the Claremont Graduate School, where he worked under the direction of Charles S. Campbell.

This fifteen-chapter account begins with a synthesis of Hawai'ian history and the rise of the ruling monarchy prior to 1885. The subsequent narrative unfolds chronologically, while also offering some broad thematic chapters that address such topics as immigration, trade reciprocity, and developing naval technology. The author chronicles the rise of the influence of American planters on the islands and the impact that immigration, particularly from Japan, had on the dynamics of Hawai'ian society. This process ultimately culminated with what Morgan calls the "fragmentation of Hawai'ian politics" (the title of the book's fifth chapter). The author paints a fascinating picture of Hawai'ian society in which the island's native Hawai'ian, white, and Asian communities competed for power. That fragmentation helped set

the stage for the American-led overthrow of the Hawai`ian monarchy in 1893, a move the American planter elite saw as essential to protecting their interests.

Morgan offers a valuable retelling of that American-led revolution, which replaced the monarchy with a republic whose leadership hoped for annexation to the United States. Morgan's analysis convincingly discredits longstanding speculation of conspiratorial collusion between the rebels and the American officials on the ground in Hawai`i. Morgan is most forceful in distinguishing his interpretation from the conspiratorial accusations persistent in works that span the twentieth century, including those by Robert McElroy, Merze Tate, and Helena Allen, and Richard Budnick.¹ To be sure, Morgan is scathing in his criticism of those American officials, particularly Minister John Stevens and Navy Captain Gilbert Wiltse. He repeatedly criticizes their series of blatantly "improper" (106-108) actions that lay well outside the bounds of diplomatic propriety and undoubtedly helped the rebels' cause. Morgan also criticizes the monarchy's lack of vision, and "weak leadership and poor judgment" (103), which undermined potential opportunities to stifle the nascent rebellion. In so doing, Morgan's highly detailed recounting of the Hawai`ian revolution differs from the aforementioned accounts, as well as those of Charles Campbell Jr. and Eric Love.² Morgan suggests that U.S. officials were apparently less deliberate in their efforts to provide help to the unfolding revolution, and the monarchy was less helpless when confronted with it. Still, Morgan concludes, American malfeasance (even in the absence of conspiracy) far outweighed the monarchy's missteps; "[T]he United States did wrong by Hawai`i in the 1893 revolution, even when judged by 1890s standards and practices" (241). Indeed, the distasteful and obvious American transgressions in Hawai`i poisoned opinions in the United States and rendered annexation politically impossible in the revolution's immediate aftermath.

In the following years, support for annexation grew, with prominent Republicans like Theodore Roosevelt emphasizing the commercial and, more importantly, strategic value of Hawai`i's position in the central Pacific. In response, Japan tried to increase its influence by strong-arming the Hawai`ian government into accepting more Japanese immigrants in the late 1890s. By 1897, the Japanese government used these machinations as a springboard to declaring its official opposition to the American annexation of Hawai`i; the unfolding U.S.-Japanese crisis surrounding annexation prompted Japan to send warships to Honolulu in an ineffectual attempt to secure a multilateral guarantee to protect Hawai`ian independence. Japan overplayed its hand. For the new McKinley administration, annexation jumped to a top priority. It was in this context that the Spanish-American War intruded and gave annexation the final push it needed. On the War's eve, an annexation treaty still needed a handful of the

¹ Robert M. McElroy, *Grover Cleveland, the man and the statesman: An Authorized Biography* 2 volumes (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1923); Merze Tate, *Hawaii: Reciprocity or Annexation* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1968); Helena G. Allen, *The Betrayal of Liliuokalani: Last Queen of Hawaii, 1938-1917* (Glendale, CA: A.H. Clark, 1982); Rich Budnick, *Stolen Kingdom: An American Conspiracy, with historic photos* (Honolulu: Aloha Press, 1992).

² Charles S. Campbell, *The Transformation of American Foreign Relations, 1865-1900* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976); Eric T.L. Love, *Race over Empire: Racism and U.S. Imperialism, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

votes necessary to reach the two-thirds required for ratification, while the powerful Speaker of the House Tom Reed – a rare anti-annexationist Republican – prevented a Joint Resolution from coming to a vote in the House. With the Spanish-American War underway, mounting pressure forced Reed to relent on his obstruction. Although Morgan believes that given more time, the administration could have won the remaining votes necessary for treaty ratification, and thereby bypassed the need for a Joint Resolution, concerns about Japanese machinations in Hawai'i convinced the administration that time was not a luxury it had. The claim that the islands held immediate strategic value to the United States during the Spanish-American War was, Morgan concludes, "bogus" (p. 226). It was one made of political expediency in order to ensure that the measure passed. Still, Morgan's key point is unassailable: by 1898, longstanding ideas about the island's strategic value that preceded the Spanish-American War motivated supporters of annexation to take advantage of the conflict with Spain to bring Hawai'i into the American fold once and for all. Morgan, in turn, takes issue with Thomas Osborne's contention that a desire to expand U.S. trade with China primarily propelled annexation, rather than any actual national defense concerns.³ In the process, Morgan's conclusions complement Eric Love's argument, by demonstrating that a strategic rationale intersected with the racially charged anti-Japanese rhetoric that flowed freely during the Congressional hearings on annexation.

Morgan's analysis is based on a wealth of research into archival sources, including the U.S. National Archives, the Hawai'i State Archives, the Library of Congress, and the Washington Navy Yard. Morgan's use of the British National Archives illuminates that nation's role in the international politics surrounding Hawai'i and helps cast some light on the Japanese perspective (the Japanese had hoped that Britain would join them in blocking the U.S. annexation of Hawai'i). The Japanese side is handled skillfully, although the absence of research into Japanese archival sources at times renders the 'behind-the-scenes' picture of the Japanese perspective less vivid than those of the other major actors. The U.S.-Japanese rivalry itself does not come into sharp focus until relatively late in the book. Still, these observations are not meant as criticisms of Morgan's insightful analysis or compelling argument. Morgan expertly weaves the various diplomatic, economic, political, cultural, social, and technological strands of this story into a coherent account that underscores the strategic logic behind the American annexation of Hawai'i in 1898. The result is a terrific study that makes an important contribution to the study of American imperialism at the end of the nineteenth century.

Michael Krysko is Associate Professor of History at Kansas State University, where he teaches courses on U.S. foreign relations, the history of technology, and media history. He is the author of *American Radio in China: International Encounters with Technology and Communications, 1919-41* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2011). His work on international radio has also appeared in *Technology and Culture*, *Pacific Historical Review*, and the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television*.

³ Thomas J. Osborne, *"Empire Can Wait": American Opposition to Hawaiian Annexation, 1893-1898* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1981).

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