

**THE HAWAIIAN INCIDENT: AN
EXAMINATION OF MR.
CLEVELAND'S ATTITUDE
TOWARD THE REVOLUTION OF
1893**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649484409

The Hawaiian Incident: An Examination of Mr. Cleveland's Attitude Toward the Revolution of 1893 by J. A. Gillis

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J. A. GILLIS

BOSTON

LEE AND SHEPARD PUBLISHERS

10 MILK STREET

1897

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ROCKWELL AND CHURCHILL PRESS
BOSTON

THE HAWAIIAN INCIDENT

No act of Mr. Cleveland's administration has met with such severe criticism as the course which he adopted toward the Sandwich Islands at the time of the dethronement of the Queen in 1893. No epithets have seemed sufficient to characterize his "base and ignoble policy" — a policy claimed to have been unscrupulous in itself, and opposed to all republican and democratic ideas. So constant has been the abuse lavished upon Mr. Cleveland, so persistent has been the misrepresentation of facts, that not only those of opposite politics have believed the charges against him, but some of those who have supported him in general, have thought that there must have been some cause for the abuse so freely bestowed, and have supposed that there was at least one blot upon a record otherwise unblemished.

It is intended to make some suggestions as to the real character of the proceedings in question. It is not proposed, of course, to make an exhaustive inquiry into the events preceding the so-called "revolution" resulting in the overthrow of the Queen's government, nor to ask whether this government was a good or bad one, or whether the action of the Queen was such as to justify her dethronement. To do that would require too great a space and might prove a weariness to the reader; but attention will be called to the letters and statements of the parties active in the overturn of the Hawaiian throne, which will show that this event occurred with the conni-

vance and assistance of the American minister and was aided by the presence in Honolulu of United States troops, who were called on shore from the United States ship "Boston," then lying in the harbor, ostensibly for the purpose of protecting life and property, but really for the purpose of protecting the revolutionists, while the "revolution" was going on. It will be specially noticed that the letters and statements which are relied upon to show this will be those of the chief actors, or of those whose interests lay upon their side; some testimony of the officers of the United States navy will be offered, but otherwise no statements of those interested upon the Queen's side, nor even of those who might be fairly regarded as disinterested, will be presented. No special effort will be made to defend or explain Mr. Cleveland's action, except by offering the facts as gathered in the manner alluded to, and by showing what that action was; and the reader will form his own judgment as to whether or not Mr. Cleveland's course was controlled by reason and justice, and dictated by a true regard for American honor.

In February, 1893, a report was made upon the following resolution of the United States Senate:

Resolved, That the Committee on Foreign Relations shall inquire and report whether any, and, if so, what, irregularities have occurred in the diplomatic or other intercourse between the United States and Hawaii in relation to the recent political revolution in Hawaii, and to this end said committee is authorized to send for persons and papers and to administer oaths to witnesses.

This report is published as a public document, entitled "Hawaiian Islands. Report of the Committee of Foreign Relations, United States Senate, with accompanying documents,"¹ in two volumes, which contain also the testimony

¹ The figures in the text refer to a list at the close of this volume, in which references are made to the pages of this Report.

taken before the committee, that taken by Mr. Blount in Honolulu, and various papers, official and otherwise, pertaining to the Hawaiian Islands.

It is unnecessary to say that the statements made by the parties testifying on the one side and the other are wholly contradictory upon nearly every important point.

In order to understand the course of events at Honolulu it is necessary to take into view the ideas and sentiments of Mr. John L. Stevens, the United States minister at the Sandwich Islands. It will appear most clearly that Mr. Stevens regarded himself as having a mission, that mission being to bring about the annexation of the islands to the United States, which he was ready to promote and recommend at all times and seasons. To show this a few citations will be given. He was appointed in June, 1889, and arrived in Honolulu on the twentieth of September of that year, and on the seventh of October he writes to Mr. Blaine :¹

I am much impressed by the strong American feeling pervading the best portion of the population, and which is especially manifest among the men of business and property.

On the 20th of March, 1890, he writes again to Mr. Blaine :²

The actions of the department of State afford conclusive evidence of the interest which the government of the United States has long taken in the affairs of the Hawaiian Islands. That these tendencies are of great importance to the future development and defence of American commerce in the Pacific hardly will be questioned. To secure the influence over them which the United States so long has considered its right and duty to maintain, some decisive steps must soon be taken which, in the past, were not of pressing necessity. For more than half a century the American Missionary Board, with the agencies and influences in its control, has served as a strong fortress to the United States in these islands. The large financial contributions, amounting to nearly one million of dollars, which that organization obtained through innumerable

channels of American benevolence and religious zeal, and the large number of educated and resolute agents which it sent to these islands, secured an influence over the ruling chiefs and native population which held them as firmly to America as a permanent military force could have done.

But a change of facts and circumstances in recent years is bringing near the time when this well-sustained power must be strongly re-enforced. In a large and increasing degree other influences have come in to counterbalance and relatively to decrease the American missionary influences.

Shall American civilization ultimately prevail here? The near future is to show conclusively that only the strong pressure and continual vigilance of the United States can enable American men and American ideas to hold ascendancy here and make these islands as prosperous and valuable to American commerce, and to American marine supremacy in the North Pacific, as the isles of the Mediterranean have been and are to its adjacent nations.

On the 20th of August, 1891, he writes :³

The best security in the future, and the only permanent security, will be the moral pressure of the business men and of what are termed "the missionary people," and the presence in the harbor of Honolulu of an American man-of-war.

But as early as the first of December, without fail, the month preceding the election, and for sometime thereafter, there should be a United States vessel here to render things secure. I have strong reluctance to being regarded an alarmist, but with due regard to my responsibility I am impelled to express the opinion that a proper regard for American interests will require one ship here most of the time in 1892.

On the 8th of February, 1892, he writes :⁴

There are increasing indications that the annexation sentiment is growing among the business men, as well as with the less responsible of the foreign and native population of the islands. The present political situation is feverish, and I see no prospect of its being permanently otherwise until these islands become a part of the American Union or a possession of Great Britain.

At a future time, after the proposed treaty shall have been ratified, I shall deem it my official duty to give a more elaborate statement of facts and reasons why a "new departure" by the United States as to Hawaii is rapidly becoming a necessity, that a "protectorate" is impracticable, and that annexation must be the future remedy, or else Great Britain will be furnished with circumstances and opportunity to get a hold on these islands which will cause future serious embarrassment to the United States.

Again in a long and elaborate letter to Mr. Foster, Secretary of State under Mr. Harrison's administration, we have the following:⁵

[Confidential.]

UNITED STATES LEGATION,
HONOLULU, Nov. 20, 1892.

SIR: Fidelity to the trust imposed on me by the President, the Department of State, and the Senate requires that I should make a careful and full statement of the financial, agricultural, social, and political condition of these islands. An intelligent and impartial examination of the facts can hardly fail to lead to the conclusion that the relations and policy of the United States toward Hawaii will soon demand some change, if not the adoption of decisive measures, with the aim to secure American interests and future supremacy by encouraging Hawaiian development and aiding to promote responsible government in these islands.

Directly and indirectly, the palace probably costs the little kingdom \$150,000 per year. A governor, at \$5,000 a year, acting in harmony with the responsible men of the Legislature, would be far better for the islands than the present monarchical Government. In truth, the monarchy here is an absurd anachronism. It has nothing on which it logically or legitimately stands.

As a crown colony of Great Britain, or a territory of the United States, the Government modifications could be made readily, and good administration of the laws secured. Destiny and the vast future interests of the United States in the Pacific clearly indicate who, at no distant day, must be responsible for the government of these islands. Under a territorial government they could be as easily governed as any of the existing territories of the United States.