

An open letter to President-Elect Bill Clinton

Senator Daniel K. Akaka Papers

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Honolulu Advertiser
January 17, 1992

An open letter to President-Elect Bill Clinton

Dear President-Elect Clinton:

America looks forward with great anticipation to your inauguration on January 20.

Throughout your campaign, and in the period following your election, you have become a symbol of hope for countless Americans whose needs have been ignored and whose cause cries out for a champion.

I was especially heartened by your speech on November 3, when you proclaimed your election a "victory for the people who feel left out and left behind," and spoke of the willingness of the Clinton-Gore Administration "to face problems too long ignored." I will gladly work with you to address the challenges facing our country, so that all Americans can enjoy a brighter future under your presidency.

In keeping with the spirit of hope you have kindled, I write this letter to call your attention to the plight of Native Hawaiians and ask you to work with me to help my kindred people obtain justice and reconciliation from the U.S. government.

With your inauguration this month, America embarks on a new beginning filled with hope for its future. For Native Hawaiians, however, January will be observed in mournful remembrance of the loss of our 'aina and independence, and of the sad decline of our cultural heritage. January 17, 1993, marks the 100th anniversary of the overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawai'i by the United States government. In the eyes of Native Hawaiians, January 17 is a day of infamy.

When western explorers first traveled to the Hawaiian Islands in the 18th century, they found an advanced civilization of people with sophisticated language, culture, and religion. Indeed, the United States formally recognized the Kingdom of Hawai'i soon after the U.S. achieved independence, and thereafter entered into numerous treaties and conventions with Hawaiian monarchs. Without question, the U.S. was on friendly terms with our kingdom and its people.

Yet in January, 1893, the United States Minister assigned to the sovereign and independent Kingdom of Hawai'i conspired with a group of U.S. citizens and non-Hawaiian residents to overthrow our indigenous and lawful government. Without cause or provocation, armed U.S. naval forces invaded the Hawaiian nation and stationed themselves outside the seat of government in support of the conspirators' effort to topple the monarchy.

In the face of superior forces, and out of a deep concern for the potential loss of life, Queen Lili'uokalani yielded her authority while steadfastly protesting to the United States the illegal overthrow of her government. Without the active support and intervention by U.S. diplomatic and military representatives, the insurrection against the government of Queen Lili'uokalani would have failed for lack of popular support and insufficient arms.

In his message to Congress regarding these events, President Grover Cleveland called the overthrow an "act of war, committed with the participation of a diplomatic representative of the United States and without the authority of Congress," and urged that the Hawaiian monarchy be restored. The official U.S. investigation of the overthrow concluded that U.S. diplomatic and military representatives had abused their authority and incited a change in government. As a result, the U.S. Minister to Hawai'i was recalled from his diplomatic post and the military commander of the U.S. armed forces stationed in Hawai'i was disciplined and forced to resign his commission.

Despite this gross and obvious injustice against the Kingdom of Hawai'i and its native people at the hands of the United States Government, the acts of villainy that occurred a century ago have never been remedied. The loss of Hawaiian sovereignty and land has devastated the health, culture, and society of Native Hawaiians, with consequences that are evident throughout the islands today.

It is my profound hope that the 100th anniversary of the overthrow will serve to educate Americans about the wrongs committed against Native Hawaiians and that the injustices Hawaiians have suffered will finally be remedied. The message of compassion and hope that was the hallmark of your campaign gives me optimism that such an outcome is possible.

As you begin your term as President, I offer you the following list of initiatives that the Clinton Administration and Congress should undertake to correct a century of injustices against the native people of Hawai'i:

1. Extend a formal, solemn apology to Native Hawaiians for the overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawai'i and the consequences ensuing from the overthrow.

The Senate passed such a resolution of apology during the 102nd Congress, only to be stymied by lame duck Republicans in the House whose dilatory tactics brought all legislation to a halt. An apology for the United States' role in the overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawai'i is long overdue, and would have special significance during the one hundredth anniversary of the overthrow.

2. Proceed with the clean up, restoration, and return of Kaho'olawe Island.

Kaho'olawe, one of the eight major islands in the Hawaiian chain, represents part of Hawai'i's ceded lands (crown, government and other public lands) taken by the federal government when our islands became a U.S. territory in 1898. Since World War II, it has been used exclusively by the U.S. military as a bombing range. The island is symbolic of the abuse that our 'aina has suffered at the hands of westerners.

Kaho'olawe is the only island in the Hawaiian chain where the complete archaeological history of early Hawaiians can still be observed. In light of its rich heritage, Kaho'olawe has been placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Yet years of neglect have reduced the island to a barren, forbidding landscape.

Kaho'olawe's environment should be restored, and like other ceded Hawaiian lands, the island should be returned by the federal government.

3. Fulfill the commitment made by the federal government 70 years ago under the Hawaiian Homes Act.

Dispossessed of their land and their rich culture, the native people of Hawai'i experienced a steady deterioration in social and economic conditions in the years following the overthrow. Congress responded by enacting legislation to provide homestead opportunities so that Native Hawaiians once again could enjoy their traditional lifestyle. Unfortunately, the simple goal of the act remains unfulfilled because the federal government has failed to meet its responsibilities under this 1920 law, and has also failed to enforce homestead obligations imposed on the state.

4. Renounce the Reagan-Bush policy which maintains that efforts to redress wrongs against Native Hawaiians violate the Equal Protection Clause of the Constitution.

The Supreme Court has determined that Congress may enact legislation that specifically benefits Native American groups. Under other circumstances, such legislation might be constitutionally suspect.

As unbelievable as it may sound, the Reagan and Bush Administrations sought to single out native people of Hawai'i from other Native Americans groups by insisting that preferences which benefit Native Hawaiians are unconstitutional. This misguided and discriminatory policy should be renounced by the Clinton administration at the earliest opportunity.


5. Formally reject the majority report of the Native Hawaiian Study Commission.

In 1983, a federal study commission appointed by President Reagan issued a report which offered a selective and often misleading presentation of the events and forces leading to the overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawai'i. The Navy historian who advised the commission seriously questioned the hastiness and objectivity of the historical research underlying the report. As a result of these flaws, the commission fundamentally misinterpreted the history of Hawai'i, and its report should not be relied upon for factual determinations or interpretations of the events surrounding the overthrow. A formal rejection of the conclusions and recommendations of the commission is in order.

6. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the federal government should commence a process of self-determination for Native Hawaiians so that they can regain a measure of sovereignty that was taken from them in 1893.

As you launch your agenda for America's renewal, I urge you to embrace these long-neglected concerns of Native Hawaiians as part of that agenda. With your help, Native Hawaiians can, in part, recoup what was lost 100 years ago.

Aloha pumehana,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Daniel K. Akaka". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial 'D'.

DANIEL K. AKAKA
U. S. Senator