

Season 1, Episode 3: The Hawaiian Flag

March 9, 2020

Show Transcript

Why the Flag: The Hawaiian Flag – America's Last Kingdom

Welcome back to another episode of Why the Flag, the show that explores the stories behind the flags, and how these symbols impact our world, our histories, and ourselves. I'm Simon Mullin.

On the last episode, we discussed the Tricolour of France, and the beautiful, bloody, and ever-changing history of their blue, white, and red colors of freedom. It was a story of revolution over tyranny, freedom over oppression, and a nation's destiny over a monarch's dynasty. Yes, some painful moments and tragedies littered their path to becoming the republican icon they are today, but the values of their Tricolour are resilient, and their flag has flown over their nation for the past 190 years.

But today, we tell a different story. One that doesn't end in liberation, but annexation. A story of our own nation's destiny over another, and one country's sovereignty that all but ceased to be – except for the flag that flies over this state today. This is the story of the flag of Hawaii, and the last remnant of their once proud and independent kingdom.

Like I said in the first episode, the history of flags are the stories of us – and like us, there are stories of our own lives we may not want to remember. And the reason this story is so hard for us to remember is that it is so seldom told in our society. But this act of not remembering cannot be justified by forgetting the injustices that we've done to others. The history of the Hawaiian flag is not a story of freedom over tyranny, but one of tyranny posing with a flag of freedom. You see, flags can represent our greatest national achievements but at the same time, these very flags can tell the stories of some of our countries most grievous wrongs. But, while this is a story of occupation, it can also be a chapter in the history of our reconciliation. And that's the story we tell today.

The Hawaiian flag has kept most of its original design since the early days of their kingdom in the beginning of the 19th Century. At first glance, if you've never seen the Hawaiian flag before, I bet it's not what you would expect – because it's not a flag you'd expect to see in the United States at all. The first thing you'll notice is the Union Jack – the British flag – emblazoned in the top left-hand corner, a place called a canton, where the American flag has its 50 stars. But instead of 13 red and white stripes like the American flag, replace those with eight stripes – white, red, blue, white red blue, white red. To Americans like myself, Hawaii's flag is so jarring at first because it is the only state flag in the union to include not only a foreign country's national flag, but the flag of our foreign occupier whom we revolted against to gain independence in our own Revolutionary War.

So, why did the Hawaiians adopt the British Union Jack flag as the symbol for their kingdom? Why is it so reminiscent of the American flag, and what do its red, white, and blue stripes mean? How did this flag of sovereignty, national independence, and a unified kingdom get swallowed up, regurgitated, and become nothing more than a footnote in the history of our own country? How did the flag of the Hawaiian kingdom that we overthrew end up as a flag we adopted as our own, flying as the flag of the 50th state in these United States? As always, we'll ask, why the flag? And for today, why the flag of Hawaii? This is the history of the flag of the Hawaiian Kingdom, and now the Hawaiian state, home to a people with a nearly 1,500-year history and flag more than 200 years old. I think that to fully understand the meaning of the Hawaiian flag, we have to begin at the origins of the Hawaiian Kingdom and tell that nation's story. Let's begin.

While much of what we would call the recorded history of Hawaii began with the first European contact in the mid-18th Century, Hawaii has a long and complex history that goes as far back as the 4th or 5th Centuries, right around the time of the fall of the Roman Empire.

Sometime between 300 and 600 AD, the first people to reach Hawaii were Polynesians from the Marquesas Islands – these are a group of islands far off the western coast of Peru in what is today French Polynesia. These first peoples brought a variety of plants and animals to the new islands, including sugarcane – a crop that will become important to the story of European interest later in the story – and they settled on the coasts in small farming communities, living in general peace and independence for about 500 years.

Now, contrary to what you may think, the first foreign invaders were not the Europeans but were, in fact, the powerful war-faring Tahitians, who arrived in Hawaii around the year 1200. These Tahitians subjugated the natives and ruled over the island's inhabitants with an iron fist. They had disdain for whom they called ignorant "commoners," and the Tahitians pushed the natives into the mountains, taking the resource-rich farmland for themselves. Quickly, Tahitian language, religion, legends, and customs took over, becoming the new Hawaiian way of life.

With Hawaii firmly in Tahitian control in the 13th Century, and with a rapidly expanding population threatening the distribution of local resources, the rulers introduced a complex, hierarchical class system and government called the *Kapu system*. This class system divided society into four castes: the *alii*, the kingly class who were said to be the descendants of gods and ruled with divine power; the *kahuna*, the priests and skilled craftsmen; the *makaainana*, the large commoner class and the laborers who supported the castes above them; and the *kauwa*, the descendants of war captives, the slaves, and the outcasts.

For 500 years, the *Kapu* system reigned, with each of the eight major islands ruled by its own dynasties and developing its own sustainable economy that existed much in isolation until the first European contacts in the mid 18th Century.

A prosperous, conservative, and strictly religious society, the Hawaiians were not a unified people at the time the Europeans arrived – nor did they have any connection to the

international community – and thus did not fly a national flag. But they did have their system of highly important symbology nonetheless, which came to life not in flags, but in two major yet distinctive ways: oral chants and body tattoos.

The *Kumulipo* is the Hawaiian creation chant, their origin story, that has over two thousand lines and is told over six hours, reliving the history of the creation of the world, as well as an extended genealogy of the *alii's* – the kingly class – and their divine relatives. While flags can tell the story of a nation through color and shape, the Hawaiians instead told theirs through an extensive oral history, much like how the Torah was passed down orally for generations of ancient Jews. The Hawaiians had no native written language either, so the *Kumulipo* was passed down by word of mouth for centuries. This chant was traditionally spoken during the four lunar months of *Makahiki* season, their New Year festival, in honor of the deity, Lono, who is the god of rain, agriculture, fertility, and peace. The first European to hear the *Kumulipo* was Captain James Cook – who we will talk about soon – when he arrived on Hawaii's Kealahou Bay during the *Makahiki* season in 1779. The chant was not written down until King Kalākaua printed it in 1889, and it was first published in English by the last Hawaiian monarch, Queen Liliuokalani, while under house arrest by the Americans in 1897.

And much like a flag, coat of arms, or battle standard can represent heraldry and clan, the Polynesian Hawaiians instead wore their symbols on their skin, through distinctive and deeply emblematic tattoos. The Polynesians had no writing and of course, no flags, but for more than 2000 years, they had developed a complex variety of images and motifs to tattoo on their skin to communicate their tribe, genealogy, status, and class in society. For example, human figures – called *enata* in the Marquesan language – represented their relations with other people. If these *enata* were placed upside down – as one would do with an enemy flag when a ship or fort is captured in battle – these upside-down *enata* represented their defeated enemies. Other classic symbols include spears, to represent the warrior class; tiki figures, to show affiliation with their gods; turtles as a sign for peace – and sometimes death; and lizards and geckos, who were said to communicate with the spirit world.

Just about everyone in ancient Polynesia had these elaborate tattoos, often covering their body from the mid-torso to their knees. And Captain James Cook was one of the first Europeans to come into contact with these tattooed tribesmen and brought the word tattoo – a bastardized version of the Tahitian word, *tatau* – back to Europe after his voyage to Tahiti in 1771.

Now let's talk about James Cook. One cannot tell the history of Hawaii without him. In 1776, as the American Revolution was raging against the British in the United States, Captain James Cook sailed from England as commander of two ships; The H.M.S. Resolution and the Discovery, with the Union Jack as their ensign. On January 18, 1778, Cook sailed past the Hawaiian island of Oahu, and docked in Kauai two days later, naming this island chain the Sandwich Islands in honor of John Montague, the Earl of Sandwich, and one of his explorations' financiers. He brazenly ignored the fact that the governments of these islands already had a name for their country, which he jotted down in his notebook as O-W-Y-H-E-E, Owyhee.

Unfortunately for Cook, it was his brazenness and superiority complex that would be his downfall.

As the first Europeans to reach the so-called Sandwich Islands, Cook and his men were first greeted warmly by the native Hawaiians, who were fascinated by their massive ships, their iron tools, and iron nails, and of course, their weapons. They quickly began a friendly trading agreement: we'll give you metal and iron, and you give us some women to have sex with. Ah, Colonial chivalry at its finest. When Cook arrived a second time in 1779, he landed in Kealahou Bay during the New Year's *Makahiki* season, which we discussed earlier. Because of the religious significance of the bay and the time he landed, the natives believed that this was the arrival of Lono, of the gods, and in return, Cook and his men exploited these people for everything they could. Cook and his men were proven to be mortals, however, after one of them died. And, as relations soured, they were forced back out to sea. But then they set out, one of Cook's ships became badly damaged in the bad weather, and he decided to turn back and test his luck with the angry Hawaiians he had just ripped off. When he arrived on February 13, the peaceful *Makahiki* season had just come to an end, the warring season had begun, and the battle-ready Hawaiians were ready for a fight.

When Cook anchored his ships back in Kealahou Bay, he and his men were welcomed this time by a barrage of rocks and stones, and in the ensuing chaos, the Hawaiians made away with two of his longboats. The next morning, on February 14, Cook, along with a company of armed marines, stormed from their ships and tried to kidnap the King Kalani'opu'u, the chief monarch of the Hawaiian Big Island, to ransom his life for the return of Cook's boats. As the king was being dragged away by Cook's men, a mob descended, and Cook was stabbed to death by the king's guard – ironically killed by the same metal dagger the guard had obtained in trade with Cook just a year prior. A close-quarter battle ensued, four royal marines were killed, dozens of Hawaiian natives shot dead, and a handful of the surviving Englishmen retreated back to their boats. And before sailing away to England, they rained cannon and musket fire on the shore, killing dozens of natives indiscriminately.

As we've seen too often in the history of native peoples, their first European contact ended in a bloodbath. But this bloodbath was also a turning point in the history of their country because fighting in that victorious battle against Captain Cook was the king's nephew, a young warrior named Kamehameha, who right away saw the value of European ships and weaponry for his own ambitions. This is the man who would one day rise to become the first king of a unified Hawaii, and commission the first flag of the new Hawaiian Kingdom. We'll discuss the rise of King Kamehameha the Great and his nation's first flag right after the break.

In 1782, King Kalani'opu'u died, just three years after Cook's failed kidnapping of the Hawaiian monarch. In the natural rites of succession, the king left his eldest son, Kiwala'o, his throne and his lands. And for his warrior nephew who fought for him on the beach, Kamehameha received the unusual honor of being the guardian of the god Ku, the Hawaiian god of war and strength. The full name of this god is Ku-ka-ili-moku, which translates to something like "the island eater" or "the snatcher of the land," and the ambitious warrior Kamehameha, now in possession of

this land snatching god, would turn its power on his cousin Kiwala'o. This sparked a ferocious and bloody 10-year civil war for control over the island of Hawaii, which ended in a partial victory for Kamehameha after killing his cousin in battle. It was also the last Hawaiian war fought with traditional weapons, because Kamehameha, in a serendipitous turn of events, would soon control a vast array of western technology that he would use to turn the tide.

In 1790, the English fur trader, Captain Simon Metcalf, landed his ship, the *Eleanora*, in Kealahou Bay – a surprising choice on his part, as Cook was killed in that very bay just a decade earlier. When Metcalf docked, a Hawaiian raided the ship and stole a small boat, killing an Englishman in the process. Sound familiar? Long story short, this infuriated Metcalf, who in response opened fire on a large group of unarmed Hawaiians, killing over 100 men, women, and children in what is today called the Olowalu Massacre. This news reached Kamehameha's counselor, Chief Kame'eiamoku, who vowed his revenge. So, when Simon Metcalf's son, Thomas, landed his ship, *The Fair American*, in the same harbor shortly after, the chief attacked, killing every white man on board except for a Welsh sailor named Isaac Davis, who he took back to the king as his captive. Along with Isaac Davis was another prisoner, John Young, who was aboard the *Eleanora* but was left behind by Simon Metcalf as he escaped with his men.

Now this is where things get very interesting. Instead of punishing his captives, the king saw the incredible advantage that the gods had just bestowed on him: a warship, a cache of muskets and canons, and two seasoned English sailors who would teach him and his army how to use his new armory. By 1791, with his two trusted English advisors and their weapons, Kamehameha conquered the Big Island, ending his 11-year struggle for its control. He was now the reigning monarch of Hawaii. But Kamehameha was far from finished, as he began setting his sights on Maui, Oahu, and the other islands that would soon be his for the taking.

In 1793, Captain George Vancouver – who in fact, had previously visited Hawaii with James Cook – returned to the island aboard the *H.M.S. Discovery*. Vancouver was greeted warmly by King Kamehameha, who wanted his help – specifically his weapons – to aid him in his conquest of the remaining Hawaiian Islands. A true man of empire, Vancouver agreed to supply him, but Hawaii would need to become an official British protectorate in return. And as a sign of the two nation's cooperation, Vancouver gave the king a Red Ensign – a red flag with a British Union Jack in its canton. Kamehameha gladly accepted this flag, and he flew it proudly as his own, as the flag of his kingdom throughout his conquests. A quick note: this version of the Union Jack flown by Kamehameha did not include the St. Patrick's Cross of Ireland, which was adopted by the British later in 1801.

By 1810, through both violence and diplomacy, Kamehameha had conquered the entire archipelago, from Hawaii to Kauai, uniting them as a single Hawaiian kingdom for the first time in its history. He established a monarchy based on the European style – but of course, keeping the rigorous *kapu* caste system in place. Thus, as a British protectorate from 1794 to 1816, this kingdom's flag was the Union Jack on the Red Ensign, a symbol of both Hawaiian sovereignty and independence, as well as their king's lasting bond with King George and the British Empire.

But not everyone was very happy with Hawaii's choice of flag – and even people within his own government urged him to adopt a new flag just in case a nation with an unfriendly view of the British mistook them for nothing more than an English colony and turn their guns on their burgeoning island kingdom. Worse, they feared, is that their vital sandalwood trade and their influx of Russian, French, or American goods would dry up if those nations soured with their British friends. And these fears came close to fruition as their British protectorate was drawn into a war in the summer of 1812.

Since about 1790, Hawaii's most lucrative export had been sandalwood – especially for western traders bringing it to China, where sandalwood was used for incense and medicine. And in 1811, much to the chagrin of British traders, an American, Boston-based company built a complete monopoly on the Hawaiian sandalwood trade, strengthening the ties between the a recently departed British colony – the United States – and the new British protectorate, Hawaii. And to placate his new friends, Kamehameha began flying both the American and British flags over his islands, alternating between the two, depending on who was coming to his shores to trade. This seemingly harmless sign of mutual friendship came to a boiling point when, on June 18, 1812, President James Madison declared war on Great Britain and invaded the British territory of Canada. And in response, the British navy established a blockade of Hawaii to strangle American trade routes. Now nothing but a mere pawn between two stronger powers, King Kamehameha was in a bit of a pickle. The British demanded he fly the Union Jack once again. His rich American friends much preferred the Stars and Stripes. Only by choosing the right flag, he thought, would he get himself out of this mess and maintain good trade relations with both nations.

And just then, Kamehameha had a brilliant idea. He would create a flag that would avoid this kind of conflict from ever arising again. In 1816, after cautiously waiting out the war, he commissioned a flag that on one hand looked remarkably similar to the flag of the British East India Company, but on the other hand combined the most prominent aspects of both the British and American flags: A Union Jack in the top left corner and a field of red, white, and blue stripes. It's interesting to note that there is no official symbolism for the red, white, blue colors – but it's more than likely that they were influenced by the nations who first visited their island: the British, the Americans, the French, and the Russians – all with red, white, and blue flags. There are also disputed claims about who in fact designed this flag, whether it was one of his British advisers – Alexander Adams or George Charles Beckley or the king himself – and oddly enough, the Hawaiian flag was not standardized for nearly thirty years. Some versions flew seven stripes, others nine, and even the colors of the stripes alternated based on the flag-bearers design. However, on May 25, 1845, under Kamehameha III, the Hawaiian flag you see today was born, with the Union Jack nodding to their historical alliance with Britain, the striped pattern for their friendship with the United States, and a field of eight stripes to represent the eight unified islands of Hawaii.

Even though these islands were unified under a single flag, and despite the fact that their country was internationally recognized as a sovereign nation in 1843, Hawaii's troubles were

just beginning – and their flag was on a collision course with the new stars and stripes of a young expansionist juggernaut the likes of which the western hemisphere had never before seen. Hawaiian independence would soon come face-to-face with the manifest destiny – and the sweet tooth – of The United States of America. We'll be right back after the break.

Hawaii's trade partnerships with China, Britain, Russia, France, and the United States quickly modernized Hawaiian society throughout the 19th Century and poured lavish wealth into the coffers of its aristocracy. But along with their money, metal, iron, and weapons, these nations also brought their disease – and much like the stories we hear of Native American populations being wiped out by disease, this insidious byproduct of western empire – chickenpox, polio, tuberculosis – was killing huge numbers of the native Hawaiian community. In 1803, yellow fever alone killed 175,000 people. The royals were not spared: In 1824, King Kamehameha II and his wife were killed by measles on a diplomatic trip to London. And in 1848, a succession of deadly epidemics hit the islands – measles, whooping cough, dysentery, and influenza – wiping out more than 10,000 native Hawaiians by 1849. To quickly put these numbers into perspective, there were nearly 3-700,000 native Hawaiians on the islands when Captain Cook first landed in 1778. By the 1920s, the population had dwindled to just under 24,000. While this highly preventable population decline should have brought the Christian powers to their aid, their American neighbors saw this as nothing more than a very lucrative economic opportunity.

You see, for much of the Hawaiian Kingdom's history, the United States placed huge import taxes on one of their most lucrative trade goods – sugar – because, well, we got our sugar for free on the backs of African American slaves. But with the fall of slavery in the United States following the civil war, American businessmen were on the hunt for a cheaper source of sugarcane that didn't require paying black people for their labor in the Louisiana sugar plantations. Thus, Hawaii's abundance of sugarcane – fatefully brought to the islands by their Polynesian ancestors 15 centuries earlier – now looked ripe for American picking. In 1875, the Hawaiian economy was in the gutter due population decline, so King Kalākaua desperately entered into what was called the Reciprocity Treaty with the United States, opening up tariff-free sugar trade in return for a tiny slice of land on the southern tip of Oahu called Pu'u Loa – but you might know it better by its current name, Pearl Harbor. Many Hawaiians opposed this treaty for land because they feared that this was nothing more than a cheap way for the United States to start annexing Hawaiian land for American business interests. They were right.

While this treaty gave a temporary sugar high to the Hawaiian economy and surely lined the pockets of dentists filling in cavities back in the United States, it was the beginning of the end of Hawaiian sovereignty – and their red, white, and blue flag that once proudly stood for Hawaiian nationhood and independence would soon be nothing more than the symbol of a puppet regime, serving at the pleasure of their new American masters.

But before we go into the story of American annexation of Hawaii, it's important that we understand the role that Americans were playing in Hawaiian politics in the many decades leading up to it. And, outside of the economic interest, we need to know why the Americans

thought that they had the sole right to annex this territory in the first place. How did the United States get so engrained in Hawaiian society that we justified its annexation? The answer has three parts: first, the hatred of Catholics. Second, the fear of the French. And third, the Hawaiian adoption of the American flag. Give me a few minutes to explain.

In 1819, Kamehameha the Great died, leaving the kingdom in the hands of his favorite wife, Ka'ahumanu, who was a convert to Protestant Christianity. Shortly after her rise, American Protestant ministers had persuaded her to criminalize Catholicism in the Hawaiian Kingdom, leading to mass arrests of and deportations of Catholic priests and the subsequent persecution of the Native Hawaiian Catholic population.

Now, if you remember from the second episode, the French saw themselves as the defenders of the Catholic faith, so they saw it as their divine responsibility to act against the Hawaiian Kingdom and their anti-Catholic regime. In 1839, the French sent a naval frigate to Honolulu under Captain Laplace, who threatened King Kamehameha III with war with France if he did not agree to end Catholic subjugation and sign the Edict of Toleration to restore Catholicism in Hawaii. On June 17, 1839, fearing that his kingdom could not defend itself from French invasion, he succumbed to their demands, paid \$20,000 in restitution, and donated land to the Catholic Church, which would one day become the Cathedral of Our Lady of Peace, which still stands today. This would become known as the Laplace Affair. Terrified of another incident, King Kamehameha III sent diplomats to the United States in 1842 to ask for their recognition of sovereignty, which U.S. President John Tyler assured them they would do. However, with the French Catholics victorious in Hawaii, this only irked the Protestant sensibilities of their enemy, the British, who would again flex their muscles in Hawaii. By the early 1840s, it appears that Hawaii was being used as nothing more than a pawn in the tri-lateral power games of France, Britain, and the United States. In early 1843, the British now claimed that their Protestant subjects were being mistreated, so, under Captain Paulet, they captured the Hawaiian Islands in the name of Queen Victoria. Captain Paulet's first act was to remove and destroy every Hawaiian flag the British could find, and raise the true Union Jack in its place. This desecration of their flag was a powerful message to the Hawaiian people that they were now subjects of the United Kingdom, no longer independent. For six months, the Hawaiian flag was banned, and any use of it swiftly dealt with by the British occupiers. But, to their rescue, came none other than the Americans, who, with both heavy gunships and diplomacy, negotiated the release of Hawaii from British hands, and helped reclaim Kamehameha III as the ruler of an independent Hawaii.

Thus, on November 28, 1843, France, Britain, and the United States recognized the Kingdom of Hawaii as an independent state – a date still celebrated by Native Hawaiians as their Independence Day. Two years later, as I mentioned earlier, the Hawaiian flag you see today was commissioned and recognized by the international community. But this independence would again be tested by the Catholic French, and it would be the Americans who would once again step in as Hawaii's protectors.

In August 1849, the French Admiral Louis Tromelin invaded Honolulu in the name of defending Catholics from persecution – but in reality, it was to lower tariffs on French brandy imports. Along with 140 French marines, Tromelin captured the Honolulu Fort, ransacked government buildings, and, of course, looted everything they could get their hands on. This was nothing more than piracy in the name of Christian morality. After a few days of wreaking havoc on the island, Tromelin and his men fled before another power, the United States, could come to Hawaii's aid. While this was a minor incident in the long-run, this vulnerability to attack traumatized Kamehameha III, who decided once and for all that he would need real protection to avoid another humiliation. So, he hedged his bets with the Americans, and on March 10, 1851, he proclaimed that Hawaii would from now on be a protectorate of the United States.

"By and with the advice and consent of...our council of native chiefs, finding our relations with France so oppressive to our Kingdom, so inconsistent with its rights as an independent state, and so obstructive of all our endeavors to administer the government of our islands with equal justice to all nations and equal independence of all foreign control, and despairing of equity and justice from France: Hereby proclaim as our royal will and pleasure that all our islands, and all our rights as a sovereign over them, are from the date hereof placed under the protection and safeguard of the United States of America until some arrangements can be made to place our said relations with France upon a footing compatible with our rights as an independent sovereign under the law of nations and compatible with our treaty engagements with other foreign nations; or, if such arrangements should be found impracticable, then it is our wish and pleasure that the protection aforesaid under the United States of America be perpetual."

I'm going to pause here for emphasis because this is when we finally get to the line that I've been building up to this entire time:

"And we further proclaim...that from the date of the publication hereof the flag of the United States of America shall be hoisted above the national ensign on all our forts and places and vessels navigating with Hawaiian registers." The Hawaiian's adopted the American flag for protection.

From 1851, the Americans were fully part of the Hawaiian political system – and its destiny. Tourists and Californian gold prospectors began to regularly escape to Hawaii in the winter, and Americans gradually became a regular sight on the beaches and in the towns. Above the Hawaiian flag was the American Stars and Stripes, on top of every building and every ship, and talk of annexation by the United States was starting to be discussed openly – not just in America but in the king's government in Hawaii as well.

By 1887, the Hawaiian population had dwindled due to disease. American pineapple and sugar plantation owners took over, exploiting the land for its resources – and exploiting its native peoples for cheap labor. American reconstruction after the civil war led to a cultural resurgence of white supremacy, and these ideas would fuel what happened next.

The plantation owners in Hawaii were growing tired of being the subjects of the non-white Hawaiian King David Kalākaua. So, with the backing and weapons of wealthy American businessmen back home, they developed an armed insurgent group called the Hawaiian League to rise up against native rule. In the summer of 1887, the Hawaiian League marched into the palace, held the king at gunpoint, and demanded that he sign a new constitution for Hawaii – a constitution that would strip the monarchy of much its power, end the suffrage of much of the native population, and give voting rights not to citizens, but those in Hawaii who had an income of \$600 or property worth more than \$3000 – and of course, who could write and read in English. For all intents and purposes, the new constitution was a transfer of power from the Hawaiian people to the local white population, who – at the end of the day – wanted to sell their goods to the United States tariff-free and amass even more wealth for the white population. Under the threat of death, the king capitulated to the Hawaiian League and signed what would be known to history as the Bayonet Constitution. After 1887, the Republic of Hawaii became nothing more than a plutocracy run by wealthy white American businesses. Four years later, King David Kalākaua died at a hotel in San Francisco, succeeded by his sister, Queen Lili'uokalani – the last monarch of Hawaii.

Queen Lili'uokalani was no pushover – and she immediately began her work to reverse the damage done by the Bayonet Constitution by writing a new constitution that would reclaim the monarchy's power and guarantee universal suffrage to the native Hawaiian population. Obviously, Hawaii's white businessmen would not stand for this, and formed what they called the Committee of Safety – a committee with the sole purpose of "overthrowing the monarchy and seeking annexation by the United States." It's interesting to note their name, as it's remarkably similar to Robespierre's Committee of Public Safety, as we discussed in episode 2, which was responsible for deposing the French monarchy.

So, on January 17, 1893, the committee's armed militia, the Honolulu Rifles – alongside 167 US Marines who were there to protect the committee – entered the 'Iolani Palace in Honolulu. To avoid violence, the queen surrendered, and the monarchy was overthrown.

On that same day, the first act of the new government, led by the American businessmen of the Hawaiian League, was to lower the Hawaiian flag from the top of the palace and replace it with the flag of the United States in a bid to promote their annexation. Although the Americans had them remove the flag in April to downplay the idea that it was the United States who had officially taken control, the damage was already done. The removal of the Hawaiian flag from 'Iolani Palace was a potent symbol to the local population and the world at large that white supremacy was now the law of the land and that the Hawaiian experiment was finished. It was finished: They would never again retain their sovereignty. The Republic of Hawaii was officially formed on July 4, 1894 – American Independence Day – and within 48 hours, they were recognized as the legitimate government of Hawaii by all the major world powers. China, Japan, and Chile were the only non-white nations to recognize their government.

In early 1895, a loyalist coup to restore the monarchy failed and the queen was taken into custody and convicted of treason. While under house arrest, Queen Lili'uokalani agreed to

abdicate the throne and formally dissolve the monarchy in exchange for the pardons of her supporters who led the revolt against the white government. All hopes for the Kingdom of Hawaii and the resurrection of their sovereign flag was over – and it was during this house arrest when Queen Liliuokalani published the Hawaiian creation chant, the Kumulipo we discussed earlier, in a bid to save a piece of Hawaiian culture in the face of total destruction.

In 1897, U.S. President William McKinley negotiated a treaty with the Republic of Hawaii. And in 1898, with the breakout of the Spanish-American War, the naval base at Pearl Harbor – which King Kalākaua 20 years prior had been warned not to trade to the United States for fears of annexation – proved to be a strategic necessity to victory, and Congress swiftly voted to annex Hawaii. Two years later, Hawaii was made a territory of the United States, and McKinley appointed a man named Sanford B Dole – the leader of the Hawaiian League who was instrumental in the Bayonet Constitution and the overthrow of the monarchy – as Hawaii's first territorial governor. Hawaii was now the property of the United States.

Modern economic empires need not use blood as a means of conquest, but business. The American conquest of Hawaii was slow, deliberate, bureaucratic, and overwhelmingly racist. Hawaii's national sovereignty and dignity was overlooked by America's hunger for its natural resources and cheap labor, and justified by the white supremacist ideas that native brown folk can't be trusted to run their own affairs. These racial attitudes and the continuation of plantation politics were the reasons why it took 59 years for Hawaii to be officially adopted as the 50th state, which it finally achieved in 1959 under Dwight Eisenhower, with more than 94% of Hawaiian public support. And for their state flag, the people of Hawaii chose the symbol of their monarchy, of their kingdom, and of their nation – the flag commissioned by King Kamehameha the Great in 1816 and reconstituted by his son in 1845. This flag, the Union Jack on a field of blue, white, and red stripes, once a symbol of international friendship and brotherhood with both Britain and the United States, is but the last remnant of a once independent Hawaiian nation, flying to this day under the stars and stripes of the United States of America.

This is the end of the history of the Hawaiian flag, but it's just the beginning of the story of Hawaii's renewed push for national sovereignty and independence. As I said in the beginning of the show, while this is a story of occupation, it can also be a chapter in the history of our reconciliation.

In 1993, 100 years after the storming of the 'Iolani Palace in Honolulu, President Bill Clinton and the U.S. Congress issued an official apology to the people of Hawaii for our government's role in the overthrow of their kingdom, acknowledging:

"the indigenous Hawaiian people never directly relinquished their claims to their inherent sovereignty as a people or over their national lands to the United States, either through their monarchy or through a plebiscite or referendum."

In a bid for reconciliation, the apology continues:

"The Congress apologizes to Native Hawaiians on behalf of the people of the United States for the overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawaii on January 17, 1893... and the deprivation of the rights of Native Hawaiians to self-determination; - expresses its commitment to acknowledge the ramifications of the overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawaii, in order to provide a proper foundation for reconciliation between the United States and the Native Hawaiian people; and - urges the President of the United States to also acknowledge the ramifications of the overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawaii and to support reconciliation efforts between the United States and the Native Hawaiian people."

Over the past 30 years, the Hawaiian sovereignty movement has been gaining momentum, and even had the sympathies of America's first Hawaiian president, Barack Obama. While a bill to recognize native Hawaiians as a sovereign nation failed in the senate in 2010, I can guarantee you that this is not the last time you'll hear about it. And if you go to Hawaii today, you'll see their movement's flag hanging in shops and on cars and from windows and on top of houses: it is the inverted Hawaiian flag, their old monarchy's flag hung upside down, the international symbol for a nation in distress. A quiet act of desperation from an occupied nation laying on the outskirts of the modern world's most powerful empire.

That's it for this episode of why the flag. You can read show notes at flagpodcast.com and follow us on Instagram @flagpod. And make sure you subscribe to this show on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and Stitcher, and don't forget to give us 5 stars in the app – it really helps. See you next time.