

Substantial Disruption



The King Can Do No Wrong

By Mike Tully

I do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.

- Donald Trump, 2017

You people with this phony Emoluments Clause.

- Donald Trump, 2019

Alexander Liholiho, who became Kamehameha IV upon his elevation to the Hawai'ian throne, had a volcanic temper. One day in 1860, when his anger overcame him, he shot and mortally wounded his personal secretary – and good friend – H. A. Neilson. The last Hawai'ian monarch, Queen Liliuokalani, wrote about the episode in her historical autobiography, *Hawaii's Story*, “After the occurrence all that the tenderest of brothers could have done was proffered by the king to the wounded man,” she wrote, “but after lingering for some months, Mr. Neilson died.” The king felt badly about his terrible deed, but that was the only repercussion. “No legal notice of the event was in any way taken,” added the queen. “No person would have been foolhardy enough to propose it.” She declined to pass judgment on her ancestor: “It is not my purpose to defend the right of the king to this execution of summary vengeance, especially as it was done in a moment of anger.”

There was no Fifth Avenue in 19th century Hawai'i. Had there been, the king could have shot somebody on Fifth Avenue and gotten away with it. The monarch was above the law and his misdeeds, no matter how heinous, could not be investigated, charged, or even questioned. The king was above the law.

The queen explained that total deference to the monarch derived from Hawai'ian tribal culture. “His Majesty was trying to make us each and all happy,” she wrote, “yet even during moments of relaxation, undue familiarity, absence of etiquette, rudeness, or any other form which implied or suggested disrespect to royalty in any manner whatsoever, would never be tolerated by any one of the native chiefs of the Hawaiian people. To allow any such breach of good manners to pass unnoticed would be looked upon by his own retainers as belittling to him, and they would be the first to demand the punishment of the offender.” She conceded that the unnecessary killing of Mr. Neilson was “far too severe.”

I thought of Kamehameha IV when I read that President Donald Trump's lawyers argued to a federal judge that Trump could commit any crime without so much as an investigation by state or federal law enforcement authorities. It is not an exaggeration to

observe that the immunity being argued on behalf of a sitting president by Trump's lawyers is exactly the same kind of immunity enjoyed by Kamehameha IV when he shot and killed H. A. Neilson.

Nonetheless, there are American citizens who seem to prefer a monarch to a president, just as there are Hawai'ians who wax nostalgic for what they regard as a "benevolent" monarchy. In Hawai'i, the so-called "[Hawaiian Kingdom Government](#)" was formed in 2001. Earlier this year, a [Trump supporter told a rally](#), "'Never in my life did I think I'd like to see a dictator, but if there's going to be one, I want it to be trump.'" They fail to realize that benevolence is not really a characteristic of an absolute monarchy or dictatorship. Expecting an individual with unlimited power to use it consistently benevolently is like expecting [the scorpion to refrain from stinging the frog](#).

Queen Liliuokalani is a beloved figure in Hawai'ian history and widely considered to have been a benevolent ruler. She regarded herself as such, but gave herself away in chapters 13 and 14 of her autobiography. In the latter, entitled, "A Serious Accident," she describes how her carriage overturned and tossed her into the countryside, where she landed on a patch of marshy ground between two rocks. She suffered bruising and back strain, but no serious injuries. Yet, she devoted an entire chapter to her recovery. Contrast that with Chapter 13, describing her regency while her brother, King David Kalākaua, was on a trade mission to San Francisco. In the first paragraph she described a smallpox outbreak in Honolulu and her efforts to quarantine the area and prevent further spread. She succeeded; the outbreak was confined, but still deadly. "(I)t was a serious thing to confine its ravages to the city of Honolulu," she wrote, "in which there were some eight hundred cases and about three hundred deaths." Let that sink in: she devoted an entire chapter to her sore back from a carriage accident, but confined her description of the smallpox outbreak to a single paragraph.

That's the reality of an absolute monarchy: the subjects are disposable while the monarch is untouchable. This is why it's important to call out and condemn those who applaud while Donald Trump micturates upon the Constitution.

When Benjamin Franklin worked on an early design for the Great Seal of the United States, he included a phrase that Thomas Jefferson liked to much that the third president used it on his personal seal. It's a phrase that should be reinvigorated in the 2020 presidential campaign because it can appeal to Trump's evangelical supporters as much as civil libertarians. This is what it says:

Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God.