

ISLAND ISOLATION

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“Is Hawai‘i unique?”

Former vice president Dan Quayle took a lot of flak after he proclaimed to gathered journalists on a Honolulu stopover in 1989 that Hawai‘i “is in the Pacific. It is part of the United States that is an island that is right here.”

In 1992, he added more perspective: “Hawai‘i is a unique state. It is a state that is by itself. It is a—it is different from the other forty-nine states. Well, all states are different, but it’s got a particularly unique situation.”

To be fair, on the last occasion Quayle was answering a campaign question and seeking to minimize the potential national applications of Hawai‘i’s universal health care system. The Republican Bush-Quayle administration never found much inspiration in Democratic Hawai‘i.

Looking east. Still, in his stumbling, accidental way Dan Quayle showed more perspective about Hawai‘i than do many people who live here but don’t appreciate that we are on a group of islands over two thousand miles from the U.S. mainland and almost halfway across the ocean to Asia. Some of these people I call Kansas City Kids, because they came from the mainland and mentally never left home. Even those who have been here a long time display attitudes that are more middle American than mid-Pacific. Their idea—in sports, business ties, media coverage, education, and even most social events—is most often to make Hawai‘i like the rest of the country. For example, many such

people would think it much more natural and desirable for Hawai'i to get a North American hockey franchise than to try to develop a local soccer team to play in international competition.

We also have a good share of Kaimuki Kids, local folks of all races who don't appreciate where Hawai'i is and how that affects our thinking. For many in this group, we might as well be a suburb of Los Angeles. They may eat rice, but the horizon they scan is more east toward Las Vegas than toward the Far East. Many seem little interested in visiting their ancestral homelands in Asia, much less in seeing another group of Pacific islands.

Of course, it seems natural, even patriotic, for older generations of Asians here to look toward the mainland and want to "make it" in the American way. Hawai'i's Asians won respect for their World War II service and eventually that helped gain statehood. But now a half century later youngsters at the University of Hawai'i still aren't interested much in international careers. Maybe that news can be tempered by the thoughts that those most interested go to mainland universities and that student disinterest in overseas careers is evident all across the country. It's just that you would hope for more in a mid-Pacific state.

Hawai'i's insularity can be appalling at a time when the Asia-Pacific region is humming with possibilities. Part of our challenge is to reduce some of that island provincialism, and its associated protectionism, while keeping the best of island attitudes. That difficult achievement calls for better understanding of the problem and education—starting right at the top of our society with political and business leaders.

Are islands special? Much poetic writing says so, even though you can argue that isolated pockets on land masses sometimes behave like islands. Few have been more glowing on the subject than James Michener. He termed himself and others like him "nesomaniacs," creatures who are mad about islands.

Columnist-author Bob Krauss has mused much about the physical joys, restraints, and mental attitudes (such as less cutthroat competition, more courtesy and tolerance of different races, religions, and customs) that come with living on islands of limited space and frequent contact. In one of his books he noted that Hawai'i's nickname, "The Aloha State," makes it the only state "named after an attitude. This

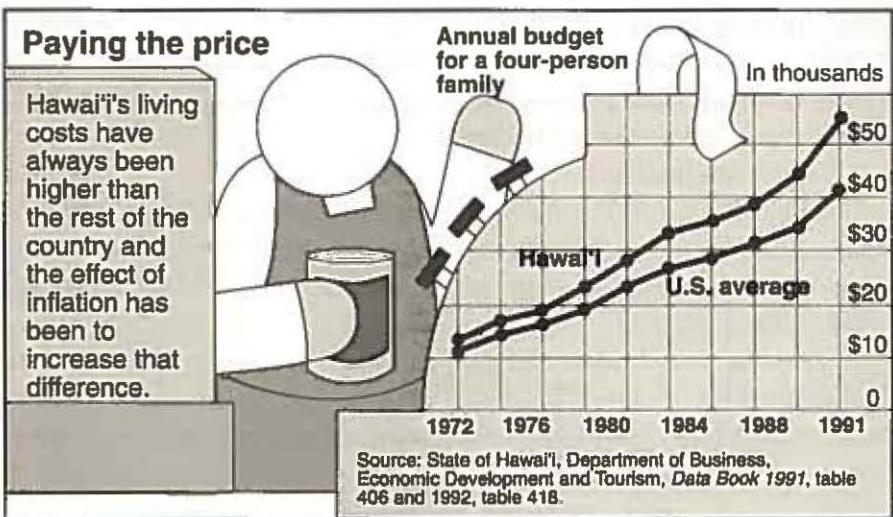
complicated state of mind sometimes baffles new arrivals."

Similarly, Jocelyn Fujii's new book about living in Hawai'i, *Under the Hula Moon*, is full of insights on the Hawaiian, missionary, plantation, and other heritages that influence our lifestyles. She notes: "Whether newcomer, kamaaina, easterner, westerner, urbanite, country folk, young or old, those who have made Hawai'i their home share a common isolation. . . . The ocean is the womb and the horizon a reminder of their self-chosen exile."

Author Paul Theroux, a part-time Hawai'i resident, has written that the ocean, seemingly nothing but water, can be everything, a highway. In one of his better speeches here, President Bush referred to the Pacific Ocean area as an "aquatic continent."

So much for the poetry—and perhaps for the counterthought that the jet age, affluence, and new communications have shrunk our old physical isolation while not expanding our mental horizons enough. Satellite television adds to the illusion-becoming-reality that we are just another part of the United States.

A harder look. Stories about our higher cost of living—more than a third above the national average—have long been a staple example of the "practical" and often negative aspects of Hawai'i as an isolated island group. Identified villains include shipping costs (not as guilty as many think), high taxes, the need to warehouse more inventory, our small and isolated market, and the high costs of construction and land.



In Volume I of *The Price of Paradise*, economist Leroy Laney cited housing costs (based in part on our limited land supply) as the key factor in Hawai'i's high cost of living. Laney also made a point many complainers don't seem to appreciate: "High prices ration this favorable environment to those willing to pay those prices. In doing so, they preserve it."

Our situation is unfortunate in that many poorer Hawai'i folks who must or want to stay here are hit hardest by our combination of high living costs and lower wages. But there's no denying that a lower cost of living would mean more people, cars, and other strains on our limited resources. Our challenge is to make the price of paradise worth more for everyone. That doesn't mean just more social equality programs dear to the hearts of us liberals; it also means more imaginative political and business leadership in creating better jobs.

Hawai'i's highly centralized government system is another well-defined heritage of being an island group with an unusual political history. That includes the monarchy last century, the plantation system, our former territorial (some would say colonial) status, and the failure of our dominant Democrats to carry out their now-faded home rule promises.

Nor is Hawai'i unique in island centralization. On a Fulbright fellowship in Southeast Asia in the late 1970s, *Advertiser* editorial page editor Jerry Burris studied how being on an island affected attitudes toward growth in Hawai'i, Singapore, Penang, and Bali. He found different attitudes (e.g., Singapore gung ho, Hawai'i getting cautious), but the common denominator was centralized control and paternalism. Being on small islands makes such things easier; what counts is what you do with the power at the top.

Some conclusions.

- Hawai'i is still the most isolated archipelago in the world, and that is compounded by our fragmented islands. This naturally makes for insular attitudes that coexist with too much tunnel vision focused toward the mainland.

- Hawai'i has had it too easy compared to many other places. Tourism and investment flooded in with statehood, the jet age, and the more recent Japanese influx. Leaders and the people didn't see a need for diversifying industrially, looking out to Asia, or dumping a political

machine that presided over the growing economic pie. Now times are changing.

- Our island location is both a blessing and a challenge. Outside forces have often shaped our community, but we are not powerless. Two strong but contradictory trends are at work in the world—one toward globalization, which we can see in telecommunications and trade, the other toward nationalism or tribalization, which at best is East European freedom and at worst ethnic war in Lebanon or Yugoslavia. The world has to live with these trends for now, so Hawai'i must balance insularism and outreach, getting the best from both. People on islands must see that they are both in "a special place" and part of a changing whole. We must learn to think locally and act globally as much as vice versa.

- We should be hard on ourselves but not consider our situation hopeless. Hawai'i has one of the oldest and most exotic political machines in the country, and it needs cleaning up. But it is not that different from other machines that have been reformed or dumped. Other chapters in this book clearly reflect the impact, good and less so, of Hawai'i as an island. And, on the plus side, there are signs that people here are not as insular as we critics claim. Some progress has been made, and maybe the recession will stir leaders to go beyond lip service in talking about Asia-Pacific opportunities. I even find hope in the growing interest in sumo, although that's been helped by stars from Hawai'i.

- My fear remains, however: we are not doing enough fast enough. Our attitudes toward life, and toward our real possibilities in the world, are being changed like indoor-outdoor housing is being replaced by air-conditioned mansions that reach the lot line and shut out the trade winds—and even the sound of the ocean that makes us an island. We are doing such things to ourselves, and too often we don't see anything wrong.

It's an island . . . Bill Clinton got elected president in part by concentrating on a slogan like this: "It's the economy, stupid." We might prosper by paraphrasing Quayle: "Hawai'i is an island right here in the middle of the Pacific."

Think about that, and maybe also about the deeper meaning of the word "aloha." Then you will know where you are—or at least could be.

