

# The Last King of Hawaii: A Legacy of Controversy and Resistance

## A Monarch's Reign in Troubled Times

In the annals of Hawaiian history, the reign of King Kalakaua (1874-1891) stands as a pivotal moment of political upheaval, cultural revival, and the eventual overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy. As the last king of Hawaii, Kalakaua inherited a kingdom grappling with the challenges of modernization, foreign influence, and a growing movement for independence. His reign would be marked by controversy, resistance, and a legacy that continues to shape contemporary debates about Hawaiian sovereignty.



## THE HAWAIIAN MONARCHY: THE LAST KING

by Wakefield Poole

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## From Noble Birth to the Throne



Kalakaua was born on November 16, 1836, into a noble Hawaiian family. His father, Kapaakea, was a high-ranking chief, and his mother, Analea Keohokālole, was a descendant of the royal line. As a young prince, Kalakaua received a traditional Hawaiian education and was trained in the arts of war and diplomacy.

In 1855, Kalakaua traveled to Europe and the United States, where he was exposed to Western ideas and culture. Upon his return to Hawaii, he became a vocal advocate for modernization and reform. In 1874, after the death of his brother, King Lunalilo, Kalakaua was elected to the throne by the Hawaiian Legislature.

### **Challenges to Royal Authority**

Kalakaua's reign was marked by political instability and a growing movement for constitutional reform. The Hawaiian Constitution of 1864 had established a constitutional monarchy, limiting the king's power and strengthening the role of the legislature. However, many Hawaiians believed that the constitution had gone too far in restricting the monarchy, while others sought to abolish it altogether.

In 1887, a group of missionaries and businessmen, led by Lorrin A. Thurston, forced Kalakaua to sign a new constitution that further curtailed his authority. Known as the Bayonet Constitution, it stripped the king of his veto power and gave the legislature the power to appoint cabinet ministers. This action sparked widespread resentment and fueled the growing movement for independence.

### **Reconnecting with Tradition**



Despite the political turmoil of his reign, Kalakaua was also known for his efforts to revive and preserve Hawaiian culture. He established the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum to showcase Hawaiian artifacts and promote the study of Hawaiian history and language. He also supported the revitalization of traditional Hawaiian music, dance, and crafts.

Kalakaua's cultural revival efforts helped to foster a growing sense of Hawaiian nationalism and identity. Many Hawaiians began to view Kalakaua as a symbol of resistance to foreign influence and a champion of Hawaiian independence.

### **The End of a Monarchy**

Kalakaua's reign came to an abrupt end on January 17, 1893, when he was overthrown in a coup led by a group of American businessmen and

sugar planters. The coup was supported by the United States government, which had been pressuring Kalakaua to sign a treaty allowing the United States to annex Hawaii.

After the coup, Kalakaua was forced to abdicate and was replaced by his sister, Queen Lili'uokalani. However, the United States quickly recognized the new government and began the process of annexation. In 1898, Hawaii was officially annexed by the United States, becoming a territory.

### **A Symbol of Hawaiian Sovereignty**



The overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy and the subsequent annexation of Hawaii by the United States have been a source of controversy and debate for over a century. Many Hawaiians believe that the overthrow was illegal and that Hawaii remains an independent nation.

King Kalakaua is remembered as a symbol of Hawaiian sovereignty and resistance to foreign domination. His legacy continues to inspire Hawaiian activists and advocates who seek to restore Hawaiian independence. The Hawaiian Sovereignty Movement, which emerged in the 1970s, has been working to achieve recognition of Hawaiian self-determination and the return of stolen Hawaiian lands.

### **A Complex and Contested Legacy**

The reign of King Kalakaua was a time of great change and upheaval in Hawaiian history. His efforts to modernize Hawaii while preserving its cultural traditions led to controversy and conflict. Ultimately, Kalakaua's reign ended with the overthrow of the monarchy and the annexation of Hawaii by the United States.

Kalakaua's legacy remains a complex and contested one. He is remembered as a reformer, a cultural champion, and a symbol of Hawaiian sovereignty. His story continues to inspire Hawaiians and non-Hawaiians alike, serving as a reminder of the challenges and triumphs of a kingdom that once stood as an independent nation in the Pacific.

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