

H. BRETT MELENDY

The New Deal Search for a Governor of Hawai'i

THE BEGINNING OF THE 1930S saw the world in a deep economic depression. By 1932, Americans were looking for new leadership to improve their lot. In January 1932, New York Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt announced his candidacy for president. On April 28, Hawai'i's Democratic Territorial Central Committee endorsed Roosevelt for his party's nomination and then endorsed Lincoln McCandless for territorial governor. The committee then prevailed upon McCandless to accept once more its nomination for delegate after assuring him that such a move would not interfere with his quest to become governor of Hawai'i. The Organic Act of 1900, creating the Territory of Hawai'i, required the president to nominate the territorial governor. Thus Island Democrats looked forward to having a Democratic governor in 1933.¹

Hawai'i's November 8, 1932, election saw Democrats increasing their numbers in the territorial legislature: in the Senate from one to four and from three to ten in the House of Representatives. However, the Republicans remained in firm control with eleven senators and twenty representatives. In the delegate's race, McCandless defeated incumbent Victor Houston, bringing him the seat he had sought for almost three decades. He served but one term, however, as Republican Samuel Wilder King turned back the Democrat's 1934 reelection bid. As Republicans staggered "under the news of the

H. Brett Melendy is professor emeritus of history at the University of Hawai'i and author of Walter Francis Dillingham, 1875-1963: Hawaiian Entrepreneur and Statesman (1996).

The Hawaiian Journal of History, vol. 32 (1998)

Democratic landslide which has even included little Hawaii," the immediate concern was which Island Democrat would become the next governor and who would occupy other federally appointed offices in the territory.²

McCandless left Honolulu on November 23, 1932, for Albany, New York, to talk with Roosevelt's transition team about who would be Hawai'i's governor. The Democratic Central Committee re-endorsed him for governor and then chose Delbert Metzger over John Wilson as a possible second choice. McCandless wanted to be governor, but, following his election as delegate, he neither stated his own plans nor endorsed Metzger or Wilson. While the Central Committee had picked Metzger as its backup candidate, Neighbor Island members preferred recently defeated Honolulu Mayor John Wilson, the long-time Democratic national committeeman from Hawai'i. Other Democrats mentioned were James Coke, Rufus Hagood, William Pittman, Joseph Poindexter, and Ingram Stainback. Given the seeming paucity of well-qualified Democrats, Republican Harold Dillingham's name surfaced, probably because he had been a Harvard classmate of Roosevelt.³

McCandless pressed incoming Postmaster General James A. Farley, who was in charge of political patronage for Roosevelt, to have the president name a governor, for as long as Lawrence M. Judd remained as governor, he could make patronage appointments that should go to Democrats. John Wilson, who had gone to Washington seeking support for his being named governor, wrote to Hawai'i's Territorial Committee Chairman William E. Miles that Roosevelt would not name any Democrat already holding elective office to an appointive office because of the unnecessary expense of holding special elections to replace an incumbent. Thus McCandless and Pittman, who had just been elected a county supervisor, would be eliminated. Wilson said that Stainback's chances were nil for he had backed Senator Harry Byrd of Virginia for the presidential nomination, and Metzger was eliminated because neither McCandless nor Wilson would endorse him.

Having found most of the local candidates ineligible or unfit, Wilson concluded that he was the only one that Island Democrats could support. However, Wilson's chances and those of the other hopefuls

had already dimmed as Colonel Louis Howe, the president's confidant, and Secretary of Interior Harold L. Ickes reviewed the applicants' files. Unimpressed by what they read, they decided to search for a good person who could take command of what appeared to be a "delicate situation," namely, the threat from Japan.⁴

Ickes wrote in his diary on May 12 that no one met Howe's and his requirements. The Interior Department then drafted an Organic Act amendment to remove the three-year residency requirement for Hawai'i's governor to permit appointing a mainlander. Ickes sent this draft amendment to Howe on May 15, and one week later, Roosevelt asked Congress to "temporarily suspend that part of the law which requires the Governor of Hawaii to be an actual resident of the Islands." Stating that Hawai'i's governor needed to be a person that the people of the Islands could rely on to be impartial in making decisions affecting them, he wanted complete freedom in selecting the best man possible. The territorial legislature immediately reacted vociferously to this attack upon its provincialism.⁵

John Rankin of Mississippi, chairman of the House Committee on Territories, introduced the proposed amendment on May 24. Richard A. Cooke, president of C. Brewer, telephoning from Washington to other Big Five executives in Honolulu, said the bill would be killed if Island Democrats could recommend someone palatable to the Roosevelt administration, but none so far was acceptable. Even faced with the prospect of a mainland governor, the Big Five could not motivate Island Democrats to forward four or five new names.

The Committee on Territories reported the bill favorably to the House for action on May 27. Two Republicans on the committee joined with Delegate McCandless in a minority report of opposition. During the June 5 House debate, with most Republicans and McCandless opposed, Democrats supported the bill. Republicans professed horror over curtailment of home rule and the imposition of a carpet-bag regime, but Democrats answered that if Roosevelt felt this change was important, Congress should not hold up passage. Representative Charles V. Truax of Ohio, a member of the Territories Committee, stated: "I frankly confess I do not know a lot about Hawaii . . . but I am for this bill because it is . . . requested by the President. . . ." Others, echoing his views that Hawai'i was an important military post,

felt that Roosevelt was the best person to judge who should be territorial governor. After more debate and acrimonious name calling, the final vote on the amendment on June 6 was 237 yeas, 119 nays, 3 reporting present, and 71 not voting.⁶

Senator Millard Tydings, Committee on Territories and Insular Possessions chairman, who thought the proposed amendment would easily pass in the Senate, sought unanimous consent to consider it without a committee hearing. Republican Senators George Norris of Nebraska and Robert LaFollette of Wisconsin forced a delay. When the Rankin bill reached the Senate floor on June 14, Senator Arthur Vandenberg of Michigan argued at length against it, and the next day William Borah of Idaho, Norris, and LaFollette joined in opposition. The Senate adjourned before the bill came to a vote. This bill was Roosevelt's only defeat in the famous first 100 days of the New Deal. In late July Roosevelt indicated that Ickes had convinced him, based upon Assistant Attorney General Seth Richardson's 1932 report in the aftermath of the Ala Moana and Massie cases, that the territory needed better administration of justice and police reform. It was this information, he claimed, that led him to submit the proposed amendment to the Organic Act.⁷

Governor Judd on September 1, 1933, asked Ickes for an explanation of the Rankin Bill because "the people of Hawaii have the right to know WHAT WERE THE REASONS ADVANCED FOR PROPOSING SUCH A HARSH CHANGE IN GOVERNMENT" and invited Ickes to visit Hawai'i. The secretary indicated he could not do so but would be willing to meet with the nonpartisan citizens committee that Judd had earlier appointed to study the impact of the bill. After Alexander G. M. Robertson, William Heen, and Samuel King, representing the committee, met with the secretary, Robertson informed Judd that Ickes's animosity toward the Big Five was the major roadblock in appointing a new governor. It was this strong feeling that had led him to propose the Organic Act amendment. Robertson added that Ickes believed

that so far no local man . . . measures up to his requirements [and] . . . that he has received letters which confirm his views as to the dominance in the Islands of the oligarchy and that he has been told by people from Hawaii that they have no objection to appointment of a main-

lander. He himself thinks it would be good for the Islands. He asked us to name a local man who would meet the requirements. . . .

After the Islanders met a second time with Ickes, the secretary claimed that he preferred "a local man if he can find one who meets the requirements" and who was "free of sugar domination."⁸

Walter Dillingham and Joseph Farrington, in separate later visits to the White House, sought to dissuade the president from pressing for the Rankin Bill. The administration, after assessing the bill's chances, abandoned the amendment and redoubled its efforts to find an Island Democrat to be governor.⁹ Rebuffed in his try for greater control over the territory, Roosevelt in May 1934 created the Division of Territories and Island Possessions as part of the Interior Department. Ernest H. Gruening, editor of the *Portland [Maine] Evening News*, became director of the division. Roosevelt, having just returned from a trip to Hawai'i, found the territory in good condition except that land ownership remained concentrated in the hands of large estates.¹⁰

This new division curtailed the freedom of Hawai'i's governor to deal directly with federal cabinet officers. Island plans and budgets requiring federal funding hereafter had to be filtered through, and approved by, bureaucrats in the Division of Territories and Island Possessions. At the same time, the division generally proved a substantial supporter of Island concerns and interests, frequently clashing with the War Department over the imposition of martial law and Island land issues.

Even as Ickes and Howe were deciding in March 1933 to reject all announced candidates for governor, the territorial Central Committee convened to consider the developing impasse. Some members advised selecting a new candidate while others advocated adding Hagood, Poindexter, Stainback, and Wilson to their list of endorsed candidates. Unable to coalesce behind a single candidate, the Democrats' frustrations grew, leading to a split in May between backers of McCandless and of former Honolulu Mayor Wilson. This fight created such antagonism among Hagood, Metzger, and Pittman supporters that the party seemed unable to agree on anyone. Poindexter and Coke appeared to be possibilities, but neither was the committee's first choice.¹¹

In October, Ickes forwarded to Howe the results of staff research concerning seven contenders. The findings, based in large part on old files, portrayed McCandless as a well-digger, capitalist, and party angel but showed that in the past his private life had not been all that might be desired. Although elderly, he was carrying out his duties as delegate with vigor. But such comments were superfluous for he already held elective office. The Interior staff dismissed Wilson as having "no dignity" and being "tied up with certain factions." But as a party man, he had "done many good things" and had James Farley's active support. The other front runner, Delbert Metzger, was discounted for "his record is not one of the best, and he is not seriously considered except by some strict party men."

The Interior staff investigations found that Dr. Rufus Hagood, who had organized Honolulu's Jefferson Club, had done an excellent job during the 1932 campaign, but he "has a southerner's idea on race and if carried to a logical conclusion will drive the Japanese into a 'block.'" William Pittman, the current president of the Jefferson Club, with close ties to Richard Cooke of C. Brewer, did not "rate with many people." James Coke and Samuel Kemp, both former jurists, also on the Interior list, gained high marks. Kemp, the staff's top candidate, described as having "brains and personality," was the "second choice of most people, and the first choice of many." However, the staff noted that he was not seen as being an aggressive administrator.¹²

In early January 1934, Frank C. Walker, national Democratic Party treasurer, suggested that Roosevelt consider Judge Joseph Poindexter, whom Walker had known in Montana, leading the president to ask Ickes: "Have we looked at his possibilities"? John Wilson claimed that Farley, Ickes, and Walker discussed the Hawai'i governorship while dining with Roosevelt in late January. Walker said he could settle the long dispute by recommending the former Montana attorney general. Farley and Ickes agreed to accept Poindexter if the Island judge measured up to Walker's endorsement. Three or four days later, the Interior Department questioned Wilson about Poindexter, but he noted on January 29 that no decision had yet been reached.¹³

On January 27, Ickes cabled Poindexter to inquire if he would accept the governorship and whether he was "free from any business or social connections or prejudices that would make it impossible for you to administer [this] office in the best interests of all the people

of the Islands. . . ." Three days later, Ickes informed the president that Poindexter, endorsed by Montana's governor and two senators, had accepted. His nomination easily cleared the Senate. Internal feuding among Island Democratic leaders had again resulted in their being bystanders in the selection process. Islanders however saw a victory for continued "home rule" and a defeat for the New Deal's proposed amendment to the Organic Act with the Honolulu lawyer's appointment.¹⁴

Sixty-five-year-old Joseph B. Poindexter took office on March 1, 1934, at a salary of \$10,000. Born in Canyon City, Oregon, on April 14, 1869, Poindexter received his law degree from St. Louis's Washington University in 1892 and then moved to Dillon, Montana. He married Margaret Conger of Dillon in 1897, and they had two children. He served as Beaverton County district attorney from 1897 to 1903 and as Montana's Fifth District judge until 1915. He was state attorney general until he moved in 1917 to Hawai'i as President Woodrow Wilson's choice as federal district judge. At the end of his six-year term, he entered private practice in Honolulu. From 1929 until his appointment as governor, he served as a special assistant to U.S. Attorney Sanford Wood. He was a member of the Democratic Central Committee and the Taxpayers Association and was president of the bar association in 1934. His wife died in 1918, and his daughter, Helen, presided over Washington Place social life while he was governor.¹⁵

Walter Dillingham, one of the Islands' leading Republicans, informed Interior Department officials in April 1934 that Poindexter's quiet manner, fairness, and professionalism had instilled a confidence among community leaders that his administration was going to be a success. But in time, the governor earned the nickname, "Mahope Joe," which meant "by and by," for he procrastinated when he had to make a decision. He also gained notoriety for his frequent and extended trips to the mainland. Poindexter proved to be a low-key administrator who posed no threat to the existing political-economic structure, a pleasing environment for the Island business and planter oligarchy.¹⁶

In 1938 as Poindexter's four-year term drew to a close, McCandless wrote Roosevelt that a change was vital in order to maintain New Deal policies. He recommended Charles J. Pietsch, head of the Hawai-

ian Housing Authority, to replace Poindexter. However, Poindexter experienced no difficulty in being reappointed. In July 1941, he underwent an operation at Walter Reed Hospital for a possible malignancy, but none was found. His illness and lengthy recuperation, coupled with his lackadaisical nature, kept him below par during the critical months of 1941 when the Army pressed the legislature to provide for martial law. Poindexter's weaknesses in December 1941, when confronted by the Army's demand to declare martial law, greatly irritated Harold Ickes.¹⁷

During the last months of Poindexter's second term, Assistant U.S. Attorney General Normal M. Littell alerted Marvin McIntyre, assistant to the president, about the need to renominate Poindexter or select another to be governor in the "Paradise of the Pacific." With



FIG. 1. Joseph B. Poindexter, right, photographed in May 1951 with his successor as governor of the Territory of Hawai'i, Ingram M. Stainback, left, and his predecessor, Lawrence M. Judd. Next to Poindexter in this *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* photo is Geneva Long, wife of Oren E. Long, who was appointed governor that year. (Hawaiian Historical Society)

growing tension in the Pacific, Hawai'i needed, he said, "a fearless man in command, capable of making decisions and getting things done." Littell had found during his recent trip to the Islands that Poindexter's own weakened condition was reflected throughout the territorial government, and he recommend that Ingram Stainback succeed Poindexter.¹⁸

McIntyre discerned that Ickes had little enthusiasm for Stainback, but the secretary admitted

that the difficulty in obtaining the right kind of man for governor of Hawaii, if we have to restrict ourselves to a resident democrat, is a major one. Governor Poindexter has never been anything to cheer about, but at least he has been unobjectionable and, on the whole, during normal times, satisfactory. However quite regardless of his health, we do need a strong man there now, and where to find the right man I do not know.

McIntyre refloated without success the idea of appointing a mainland.¹⁹

At the age of seventy-two, Poindexter's advanced years and health became critical concerns after the Pearl Harbor attack. Ickes told Delegate Sam King during the early months of the war, "that [Poindexter's] health has so far improved that he has been able to carry on in this emergency," but the *Star-Bulletin* understood that there was move afoot to replace the governor immediately. This did not happen, but to offset Poindexter's inability to cope with the impact of martial law upon the territory in early 1942, Ickes dispatched Benjamin W. Thoron as the Interior Department's special representative to serve as a civilian advisor to Lieutenant General Delos Emmons, Hawai'i's military governor. Thoron was also to look after the territory's interests, something that Poindexter's age and health prevented him from doing.

Poindexter continued as "interim governor" under martial law from March until August 1942, subservient to the military governor. Even as the Interior Department was preparing to recommend Stainback as the next governor, many people, including Delegate King, still supported Poindexter. Ickes informed King that arguments for Poindexter's reappointment were not persuasive.²⁰

Poindexter was on the mainland when Stainback was named as his successor, necessitating the cancellation of a planned Montana vacation. He returned to Honolulu to turn over his office to Stainback on August 24, 1942. He was soon appointed a trustee of the Bishop Estate, which had oversight of much of Hawai'i's privately held land. His appointment was a good indication of how much the business/planter elite appreciated his eight years as governor. He died in Honolulu on December 3, 1951, at the age of eighty-two.²¹

Both in 1913 and 1933, Island Democrats were so factionalized that leading contenders for the governorship canceled each other out, and after lengthy delays, Presidents Wilson and Roosevelt opted in each instance for a compromise candidate. Poindexter proved not to be an aggressive administrator, and the federal government used its several New Deal agencies with directors from the mainland to oversee many of the territory's central administrative functions before and after Pearl Harbor.

NOTES

Research for this article was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

¹ Lawrence H. Fuchs, *Hawaii Pono* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961) 191–92.

² Registered Voters and Votes . . . for Delegate . . . Territory of Hawaii, 1900–1952, Joseph Farrington Papers, ah; Dick H. Okaji, "The Legislature of the Territory of Hawaii: Its Organization, Structure, Procedure, Powers and Functions" (M.A. thesis, U of Missouri, 1957) 222; *HSB* Nov. 9, 1932: 1; letters, Walter F. Dillingham to Wellington Henderson, Nov. 9, 1932; Lee Warren to Dillingham, Nov. 9, 1932, Box 22, File 512 and Box 23, File 537, Walter F. Dillingham Papers, Bishop Museum, Honolulu.

³ Letters, Dillingham to L. Warren, Nov. 23, 1932; Dillingham to J. F. C. Hagens, Dec. 12, 1932 and Jan. 13, 1933, File 571 and Box 23, File 535, Dillingham Papers; *HSB* Dec. 7, 1932: 3.

⁴ Letter, McCandless to Farley, Mar. 13, 1933; to President Roosevelt, Mar. 20, 1933; to Harold Ickes, Mar. 20, 1933; John Wilson to Wm. Miles, Mar. 26, 1933, Record Group (RG) 48, Dept. of Interior, Office of Sec. of Interior, Appointment Division, U.S. National Archives (NA); J. Doyle to Dillingham, Mar. 4, 1933, Box 22, File 528, Dillingham Papers.

⁵ Harold L. Ickes, *The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953) 1: 14; Jonathan Daniels, *The Time Between the Wars: Armistice to Pearl Harbor* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966) 234–37.

- ⁶ Ickes, *Secret Diary* 1: 37; Memorandum for the Secretary in Re Proposed Amendment to the Hawaiian Organic Act, May 13, 1933, RG 126, Dept. of Interior, Office of Territories Classified File 9-4-54, Amendment of Organic Act; letter, Harold Ickes to Col. Louis Howe, May 15, 1933, NA; message, F. D. Roosevelt to Congress, May 22, 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Papers as President, OF 400 (Hawaii) Federal Appointments, Hawaii, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, Hyde Park, N.Y.; *Cong. Record*, 73 Cong. 1 sess. (1933), pp. 3875-76, 3889, 4139-41, 5015-23, 5046-47, 5107, 5198-5217; *HSB* May 23, 1933: 1-2; June 5, 1933: 1; June 8, 1933: 1, 3; U.S. House, 73 Cong., 1 sess. (1933), *Report 168 Authorize the Appointment of The Governor of Hawaii without Regard to His Being a Citizen or Resident of Hawaii*, May 27, 1933; long-distance conversation with R. A. Cooke at Washington, D.C. [by HSPA officials in Honolulu], May 24, 1933, Box 22, File 511, Dillingham Papers.
- ⁷ *Cong. Record*, 73 Cong. 1 sess. (1933), pp. 5605-08, 5970-74; *HSB* June 1, 1933: 1; letter, Geo. Norris to Mr. President, June 13, 1933; "What are you doing about a Governor for Hawaii," filed July 28, 1933, Franklin Roosevelt, Papers as President, OF 400 (Hawaii).
- ⁸ Cable, Lawrence M. Judd to Ickes, Sept. 1; letter, Ickes to Judd, Sept. 12, 1933, Lawrence M. Judd Papers, U.S. Depts.: Interior, Oct. 1933, AH; cables, Judd to President, Sec. of Interior and Judge A. G. M. Robertson, Nov. 3, 1933; Robertson to Judd, Nov. 4, 8, and 9, 1933, *ibid.*, Terr. Depts.: Home Rule Commission, 1933.
- ⁹ Letter, J. R. Farrington to Louis Howe, Dec. 8, 1933, Franklin Roosevelt, Papers as President, OF 400 (Hawaii); *HSB* Oct. 16, 1933: 1-2.
- ¹⁰ Letters, L. L. McCandless to President, Jan. 3, 1933 [1934]; Sen. Edward P. Costigan to President, Jan. 5, 1934, *ibid.*; Ickes, *Secret Diary* 1: 151; Ernest H. Gruening, *Many Battles, The Autobiography of Ernest Gruening* (New York: Liveright, 1973) 180-81.
- ¹¹ *HSB* Apr. 13, 1933: 1-2; letters, Wm. E. Miles to McCandless, May 3; to John Wilson, May 6, 1933, Lincoln McCandless Papers, Subj.: Democratic Territorial Central Committee, AH.
- ¹² Letter, Ickes to Col. Howe, Oct. 14, 1933, RG 48, Sec. of Interior, Appointment Division, File 24-10-3, Metzger, Governor, NA.
- ¹³ Memorandum, President for Sec. of Interior, Jan. 9, 1934, Franklin Roosevelt, Papers as President, OF 400 (Hawaii); letter, Wilson to Harry Stewart, Feb. 11, 1934, John Wilson Papers, Private Papers, M-182, Politics, Feb. 1934, AH.
- ¹⁴ Letters, (2) Ickes to President, Jan. 30, 1934, Franklin Roosevelt, Papers as President, OF 400 (Hawaii); letter, Ickes to Judd, Feb. 23, 1934, Lawrence Judd Papers, U.S. Depts.: Interior, Jan.-Mar. 1934; letter, Wilson to Gilbert B. Geiger, Jan. 29, 1934, John Wilson Papers, Private Papers, M-182, Politics, Jan. 16-31, 1934. See H. Brett Melendy, "The Controversial Appointment of Lucius Pinkham, Hawaii's First Democratic Governor," *HJH* 17 (1983): 185-208.
- ¹⁵ *HSB* Jan. 30, 1934: 10-2; Feb. 4, 1934: 4; Dec. 3, 1951: 1, 10; *HA* Dec. 4,

- 1951: 1, 8; Dec. 5, 1951: 4; Poindexter, "Personal History Statement," sent to Dept. of Interior, Mar. 20, 1934; letter, E. K. Burlew to Poindexter, Feb. 24, 1934, Joseph B. Poindexter Papers, U.S. Depts.: Interior, Wash. D.C. Feb-July 1934, AH; Geo. F. M. Nellist, ed., *Pan-Pacific Who's Who* (Honolulu, 1941) 559; *Current Biography*, 1942 (New York, 1942) 667-68.
- ¹⁶ Letter, Dillingham to Harry Slattery, Apr. 18, 1934, Box 27, File 627, Dillingham Papers.
- ¹⁷ Letters, McCandless to President, Feb. 10, 1938; James Roosevelt to McCandless, Feb. 21, 1938; Ickes to Mr. President, Mar. 4, 1938, Franklin Roosevelt, Papers as President, OF 400 (Hawaii); *Cong. Record*, 75 Cong. 3 Sess. (1938), p. 3042; Nellist, *Men of Hawaii*, 1935, 351-52; cable, Chas. M. Hite to Ruth Hampton, Dept. of Interior, July 14, 1941, Poindexter Papers, U.S. Depts.: Interior, June-Aug. 1941; cables, King to Hite, July 15, 16, and 17, 1941, Samuel King Papers, Delegate: U.S. Dept.: Interior, General, 1935-40, AH.
- ¹⁸ Letter, Normal Littell to McIntyre, Nov. 14, 1941, Franklin Roosevelt, Papers as President, OF 400 (Hawaii).
- ¹⁹ Letter, Ickes to McIntyre, Nov. 28, 1941, *ibid.*
- ²⁰ Letter, Ickes to King, Dec. 19, 1941, J. Poindexter Papers, War File, Misc. 1941; letters, Riley Allen to S. King, Jan. 1 and 8, 1942, S. King Papers, Delegate: War Conditions, Emergency Conditions in Hawaii, 1941-42; letters, King to Samuel Kemp, July 8 and 14, 1942; E. E. Bodge to King, July 8, 1942; Ickes to King, July 17, 1942, *ibid.*, Delegate: Misc. Subj., Politics, 1935-42.
- ²¹ *HSB* Dec. 5, 1951: 1.