

Hawaii State House Leadership Conversation
November 26, 2001
State Capitol Building, Room 431

(Show and discuss the *Hawaii 2000* book and Report, and mention my talk before Joint Session of the Legislature, January 1970).

I have learned over the years that we humans are fickle, with short and easily diverted attention-spans. Often, what are viewed as urgent matters at one time in fact are not long-range challenges, while some current concerns that should be considered over the long run are soon forgotten.

Many of the things we identified in 1970 indeed did emerge as problem/opportunities that we in Hawaii for the most part failed to use our foresight to take advantage of:

The most glaring examples are electronic technologies and the Internet, which we did identify very clearly in 1970 as a wave we should surf.

But we did not. So now, we are mere users of these technologies, made and developed elsewhere by others, rather than the innovators we could and should have been, and we are pretty far behind the curve even as users. The fact that we are still discussing whether there should be a film school at UH shows just how long it takes a very good idea at one time to emerge as a possibly good idea much later.

Another example of something we anticipated in 1970 as a wave of the future but failed to develop is biotechnology. And as the debate over the new UH med school shows, we are still uncertain.

So these things we identified thirty years ago still remain as challenges/opportunities that we continue to debate rather than act on effectively.

Others issues that we identified very clearly in 1970--such as environmental challenges and energy concerns, or the emerging aging society--have been largely ignored, though they continue to loom in the near future. Most of our present actions (public as well as private) since 1970 will make these challenges much greater than they should be, if we had acted properly then, or even now.

For me our biggest failure and personal disappointment is that Hawaii as an increasingly future-oriented and progressive community has not been sustained. Instead, the Legislature, Executive, and Supreme Court killed off institutions and processes of foresight which were working wonderfully and very usefully, preferring to dither with current concerns.

After finally becoming a line item in the budget of the University in the 1980s, as the Legislature intended when it was created in the 1970s, the Hawaii Research Center for Futures Studies, as part of the Social Science Research Institute, was one of the first

places to have its funding stolen in the economic turn down of the early 90s. It has been unfunded locally since, though we continue to do futures research which others find useful, and would be able and eager to do more locally, if asked and properly funded and staffed.

In 1970, the University of Hawaii--as much in its innovative community college system as in the Manoa flagship--was zooming towards excellence; the East West Center was gaining global prominence; and the centralized, fully-funded public school system seemed headed towards solid, yet innovative, educational stewardship.

We were then certain that those trends were going to continue. Hawaii was clearly becoming both the Harvard of the Pacific and the Geneva of the Pacific, and a vital high-tech, multicultural link between East and West, we all believed without a doubt.

Similarly, the economic future of the State looked bright in 1970, and so we didn't much worry about that. However, it was when the Hawaiian economy first, and, as it turned out, forever, turned around and headed towards the toilet during the first Oil Crisis of the early 1970s, that the State stopped looking towards the future--eventually turning its back on processes which enabled Hawaii to anticipate future problems and opportunities--and became content instead only to react to crises while failing to grasp opportunities.

While there was a period of seeming economic prosperity in the late 1980s here, it was really based on fool's gold and land speculation--not on anything fundamentally sound about the Hawaii economy.

And now, with the images of 9/11 still overwhelming our ability to reason or anticipate usefully, Hawaii, the US and the world appear to face a very frightening and unstable future--a future which need not be so frightening or unstable if we had retained our foresight capabilities and acted on the recommendations made by them. Had we done so, Hawaii might well be a much better place now than it is.

But enough of this whining about the past and about what could and should have been. What possibilities lie ahead?

First of all, the fact that you asked us to come and talk with you is a good sign. I appreciate it, and I hope I can be of use to you not only today but over the coming months and years.

Secondly, many of the old problem/opportunities remain for us to avoid, or to grasp.

Many opportunities indeed remain in electronics and biology, especially the latter. Hawaii should find its niche in these areas, and fund them properly. And our niche is more in scientific research, software development, and innovative applications than it is in hardware invention and manufacturing. So that means we need substantial upfront and continuing financial and human investments in basic and applied research and education, with payoffs deferred for some time.

As far as electronic communications technology is concerned, it was long ago understood that communication and transportation are different ways of doing the same thing. For most of human history, it was necessary to move in order to communicate. But increasingly, we have learned how to tele-communicate--to communicate from afar without having to go anywhere.

But we here in Hawaii have largely ignored that truth in our insistence on building a second city in the Ewa Plains, new highrise structures downtown, and a West Oahu campus now. The recent special session of the legislature illustrates our continuing inability to grasp the future, and our preference for shoring up the past, it seems to me--though I am very glad indeed that you did not give the Governor all of the tattered goodies he asked for.

Telecommunications is finally and clearly winning over transportation, for several interacting reasons:

1. Developments in telecom technology per se, including virtual reality, are continuing to progress amazingly. Everyday, it is less and less technologically-necessary to "go" to work, or to school, or to court, or to shop. The technology curve of transportation for these purposes is down while the technology curve of telecommunications is sharply up. I believe that your legislation should recognize and facilitate that transformation.

2. 9/11 gave fear of travel--and of everything else, including one's shadow--a big boost. While those fears will not last forever, the spate of repressive laws passed by Congress recently, using 9/11 as the excuse, will further hamper freedom of movement as well as freedom of speech for a long time, even after the cowardly mood of the public changes.

3. Populations in all economically-advanced nations are aging rapidly, Japan most significantly so, but also Europe, North America and even China. Most of these aged populations will not be nearly as well off financially as are present elderly. They cannot be counted on to travel as many elders do now.

4. Energy scarcity looms, in spite of cheap oil now. We will eventually have to learn that energy is better used for communication than for transportation wherever possible.

5. The long-ignored realities of global warming and environmental change eventually will almost completely capture the attention, time, and resources of humanity everywhere.

So, all in all, the popularity of mass, sun-based travel tourism will continue to decline.

Hawaii simply must find other sources of income. We can not just continue to lie back as we have and assume that millions of people will come here every year and leave us all their money.

Ultimately we in Hawaii have to understand that we have only one resource, and that is ourselves: our diverse, capable, multicultural selves. And we must nurture this to become the worldclass resource that it can and should become

I know that it can happen. I have had considerable experience in two places where the only resource is human--Japan, where I lived and taught for six years, and Singapore, with whose judiciary I have worked for the past four or five years. Singapore especially is an apt model in some ways--though not in all ways, to be sure. Singapore is a good model for us in terms of the enormous focus it places on education for everyone to the utmost limits of their abilities; on economic equity so that wealth is spread fairly among all citizens and not skewed towards a few as it is here; and on the care and nurturing of their multicultural community so that no groups are privileged while others become a smoldering underclass.

By contrast, we in Hawaii have refused to acknowledge the fundamental centrality of a highly and well-educated citizenry. We have a public school system that has indeed become second to none at all. It is a continuing disgrace. What we have allowed the UH to become is literally criminal, but what we have allowed our pre-K through 12 educational system to become is certifiably insane.

There are two things I am not allowed to criticize these days. One is the long-term lunacy of our current military, foreign, environmental, and domestic policies. The other is the wit and wisdom of Evan Dobbelle.

All loyal UH faculty, of which I am one, have vowed silently to close ranks behind Dobbelle and hope that he can restore UH to what it once was, and on to what it could become. I hope he can, and I support him fully.

But at the same time I am profoundly skeptical about much of what I hear. For one example, the Hawaii state system of higher education is constantly being compared to that of California, Wisconsin, Michigan, Virginia, North Carolina, and Florida.

But there are absolutely no similarities whatsoever between Hawaii and those states on the relevant dimensions of population size, land size, and economic base.

California's population is 33 million on 160 thousand square miles.

Florida's is 16 million on 58 thousand square miles.

Michigan's is 10 million on 58 thousand square miles.

North Carolina's is 7 million on 53 thousand square miles.

Hawaii has little over one million people on 6 thousand square miles, with almost all of the population on one tiny island.

And each of those other states are surrounded by other states with large populations. Hawaii, you might have noticed, is surrounded by thousands of miles of water.

We simply do not have the population base to support, nor is it spread out over a vast land mass which requires, a Berkeley of the Pacific on the one hand and a set of Hawaii State Universities on the other, and we should stop pretending we do.

Nor do we have the necessary economic base.

California's Gross State Product is over one trillion dollars.

Florida's GSP is over 400 billion.

Michigan's is nearly 300 billion.

North Carolina's is about 250 billion.

By stark contrast, the Gross State Product of Hawaii is 40 billion dollars.

We simply are not in their league. They have vast resources we can never have.

What states should we compare ourselves to? Because of our physical isolation, there are none, but our peers in terms of population and GSP are Idaho, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and the two Dakotas combined.

If we want to develop a proper system of higher education, maybe we should look to those states for guidance. But even they are surrounded by people and economic resources they can draw on that we do not have.

Now, one reason I am proud to live in Hawaii is because we don't compare ourselves to Idaho, New Hampshire, and the Dakotas, and because we say we do want to be the Berkeley of the Pacific in education, research, and professor's salaries, and the Notre Dame of the Pacific in football--which is to say, we want to be like Stanford--excellent in everything.

So do I.

But is it realistic?

Not if I forecast the future by looking at the sorry physical condition into which UHM and our public school system have sunk. Not if I look at our continuing eagerness to put up ugly and dysfunctional public buildings all over the island while refusing then either to furnish them adequately or to keep them in repair.

Not if I reflect on insult after insult our Governor has lavished on University faculty and students alike for the past decade, preceded by years of abuse by some members of the Board of Trustees and others.

No, by looking backward at our educational history, I see no reason to be optimistic about our future.

Of course there ARE ways for Hawaii to be excellent in education and thus for our citizens to be world leaders in everything they do.

But it means not trying to model ourselves after something we cannot be. It means finding a new way to deliver education that isn't based on putting up more and more ugly and dysfunctional buildings. It means finding our own way that is innovative in the use of local personnel, communications hardware and software, and already-existing buildings.

It means privileging education over other sectors so that we are not perpetually starving and insulting the only resource upon which we can ever hope to build a bright future, our youth.

It means rejecting the neoliberal fantasy that taxes are bad, that public servants are incompetent and lazy, and that everything the private sector does is always better than what the community, acting through its legislators and civil servants, chooses to do. It means restoring pride in public service, including pride--and reasonable economic reward--in public teaching.

It means creating such a unique, excellent, and diverse tele-educational network here that University of California professors will one day storm the statehouse in Sacramento demanding that their legislature make Berkeley the Hawaii of the Pacific Rim!

It can be done, and I hope you will strive to make it so.

Thank you.