Does Hawaii Want To Secede From The Union?

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Does Hawaii want to secede from the Union? That sounds like a preposterous question, but the official Office of Hawaiian Affairs advertises on its website that the legislation scheduled to be voted on soon in the U.S. Senate will give Native Hawaiians "self-determination" to choose "total independence" or any other form of government.

Hawaii is asking the U.S. Senate to create a Hawaiian race-based government for persons with Native Hawaiian blood living anywhere in the United States. I'm not making this up; it's real.

According to S. 147, a Native Hawaiian is anyone of the "indigenous, native people of Hawaii" who is a "direct lineal descendant of the aboriginal, indigenous, native people" who resided in the Hawaiian Islands before 1893 and "exercised sovereignty" in that region. That convoluted definition must have been written by lawyers.

The use of the word sovereignty is peculiar because only nations and kings or queens exercise sovereignty. Hawaii was a monarchy in 1893, and Queen Liliuokalani exercised sovereignty, but the bill can't mean only her direct lineal descendants.

So, to be a Native Hawaiian, you don't need to have lived in Hawaii or ever had any affiliation with Native Hawaiian culture, language or politics. You just need to have one drop of the right kind of blood.

That reminds me of the greatest musical ever written, Jerome Kern's "Show Boat," where an essential part of the story line is that one drop of Negro blood made a man an American Negro. I thought we had put all those racial notions behind us and moved on, but S. 147 is trying to bring them back.

S. 147 would create a racially separate government that would operate like an Indian tribe with its own laws and racial voting restrictions anywhere in the United States. This new "tribe" would include about 20 percent of Hawaii's residents plus some 400,000 Americans nationwide, making it the largest Indian tribe.

The people under the jurisdiction of this new government would not be defined by geography, community or cultural cohesiveness, but by race. This sort of racial division, separatism, and ethnic separation is so offensive that it's hard to see how grown-ups could be seriously considering it.

Hawaii is our preeminent example of the success of the melting-pot theory: people of all races have intermarried for nearly two centuries. Nearly half of all marriages in Hawaii are interracial, a figure that is ten times higher than the rest of the United States.

Three-fourths of those who claim to be "pure" Native Hawaiians marry other races. More than half of those who claim to be "part" Native Hawaiian do likewise.

We are trying to spread democracy around the world, but that message doesn't seem to have reached the sponsors of S. 147. The bill does not assure that the new race-based government will be democratic; nothing in the bill prevents it from becoming a theocratic monarchy (with a new Queen Liliuokalani?).

Nor is there any procedure to enable Hawaiians to decide whether they want to authorize this race-based government in our midst. The procedure sounds like the high-handed way the European elite tried to put over the European Union Constitution without consulting the voters.

Since the debate over Supreme Court nominees has made "settled law" a favorite expression, we should point out that when Hawaii became a state, it became settled law that Hawaiians would accept the United States Constitution, and that there would be no more monarchy and no more separate government or sovereignty for Native Hawaiians. We had a national consensus both in and out of Hawaii that Native Hawaiians would be Americans, not treated as a separate racial group.

Advocates for Hawaiian statehood repeatedly then emphasized that Hawaii is a melting pot of racial and national origins who are joined in a common patriotism and faith in American institutions. So why are we spending time discussing this retro idea?

Follow the money to search for motives behind this odd-ball legislation. The clue to the mystery is Section 8(b) of S. 147, which ensures that the new Native Hawaiian government can negotiate gambling rights with the state of Hawaii and the federal government.

It appears that some politically well-connected Hawaiians want to cash in on the profitable casino privileges that have been given to American Indian tribes. Another possible motive is that a small group of Native Hawaiians is trying to grab some of the high-priced real estate in the beautiful islands and claim it as their tribal heritage.

To find these pots of gold at the end of the rainbow, the Native Hawaiians want to pretend they are a "tribe." This is fantasyland: the sponsors must have been reading too much Harry Potter.

Creating a race-based society would take us in the wrong direction, a step backwards, offensive to our Constitution and to our national commitment to equal justice for all.