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Prostitutes on Strike: The Women of Hotel Street During World War II

On a Sunday afternoon the nation listened as radio announcers spoke in shocked tones of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The date was December 7, 1941. World War II would transform these then remote, ethnically diverse islands no less than the mainland as the military made Hawaii its midpoint stopover in the Pacific. For those returning from combat as well as for those going into it, the place to go in Honolulu was Hotel Street.

The following essay focuses on the women of Hotel Street, more particularly the sex workers who populated its brothels. Note the conditions of work, the complicity and concerns of military authorities, and the conflict between the military and the local police, who acted as agents of the local elite. Note, too, the way the prostitutes maneuvered to improve their lives. What did these women have in common with the battered women described by Linda Gordon? How did the Hotel Street prostitutes inadvertently serve to undermine Hawaii's racial hierarchy? In what other respects did their strategy foreshadow that of postwar civil rights activists?

Hotel Street was the center of Honolulu's eponymous vice district, through which some 30,000 or more soldiers, sailors, and war workers passed on any given day during most of World War II. . . . On Hotel Street, some of the most complex issues in America's history came together. Systems of race and of gender (complicated by both sex and war) structured individual experience and public policy. At the same time, the story of Hawaii's vice district revolves around the changing role of the State, as it asserted its interests in counterpoint to local elites. For most of the war Hawaii was under martial law, ruled by a military governor. Even if not fully by intention, agents of the federal government—ironically in the form of the military and martial law—emerged as limited guarantors of equality and created openings for social strugle. . . . A critical part of this struggle for power centered on prostitution and its control. . . .

Hotel Street was more than just brothels,

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but it was the brothels, for most of the men, that gave the district its identity and its dark magic. During the war years fifteen brothels operated in this section of Chinatown, their presence signaled by neatly lettered, somewhat circumspect signs ("The Bronx Rooms," "The Senator Hotel," "Rex Rooms") and by the lines of men that wound down the streets and alleyways. The brothels were not new; they had developed along with Honolulu's status as a port city, and had, in recent years, served both the growing military population and the plantation workers who came to town on paydays.[1]

Prostitution was illegal in Hawaii. Nonetheless, it existed as a highly and openly regulated system, involving the police department, government officials, and the military. Red-light districts in Honolulu had survived a Progressive Era campaign to close them down, and flourished in the face of the World War II–era May Act until late 1944, when an emerging new political elite succeeded in closing the houses.[2]

Some of the reasons for the brothels' survival are found in Hawaii's multiracial and multicultural society. To many of the people who made up the islands' varied population, prostitution was not a "social evil." And many of the islands' white elite, the "respectable" people who would have provided the necessary pressure to have the brothels closed down, approved of a regulated system of prostitution. The brothels, many believed, kept the predominately lower-class white soldiers and sailors and especially the overwhelmingly male and dark-skinned population of plantation workers [who lived in communities with few women] away from the islands' respectable women, who were, by their definition, white.[3] The head of the Honolulu Police Commission (which was comprised solely of leading white businessmen) said it directly: too many men in and around Honolulu were "just like animals."[4] An editorial in *Hawaii*, a magazine published and supported by the *haole* elite, explained further: "If the sexual desires of men in this predominately masculine community are *going to be satisfied*, certainly not one of us but would rather see them satisfied in regulated brothels than by our young girls and women—whether by rape, seduction or the encouraging of natural tendencies.[5] . . ." The brothels, they thought, helped keep the peace.

The military was pleased with the system, for regulated prostitution kept venereal disease rates relatively low in Hawaii. During World War II, this consideration became especially important. Like any other illness, venereal disease hurt the war effort by cutting into military manpower. At the end of World War I more men left military service with a contagious venereal disease than had been wounded in battle. While the military officials in Hawaii *never* said publicly and directly that they supported regulated vice districts, the military participated fully in the regulation process, putting houses off limits to the men if they broke rules that would compromise venereal disease control, and setting up prophylaxis stations in Honolulu. Each brothel had a sign in its waiting room reminding the men where the "pro" stations were and why it was important for them to make use of the service. The prophylaxis stations were free and open to all—civilian and military—and the Hotel Street stations could handle 1,500 men an hour.[6]

The police department, while to some extent acting on behalf of the *haole* elite, also benefited from the system. Like most police departments, the Honolulu police understood that shutting down the vice district would not end prostitution. Police officials believed that unregulated, dispersed prostitution would more likely be rife with pimps, procurers, and other men who used violence to enforce their criminal order on both the prostitutes and their customers, thus creating much unpleasantness for the police department. In Honolulu, the chief of police personally decided who might open a brothel and who would suffer penalties. The department, according to several sources, received steady payoff money to overlook the varied forms of vice that accompanied the quasi-legal acts of prostitution.[7]

The central charge of the police department was to keep the district orderly and to keep the prostitutes out of sight of respectable Honolulu. The majority of official Honolulu prostitutes were white women recruited through San Francisco. Both police and madams preferred it that way, for women from the mainland had fewer choices but to go along with the system. Each prostitute arriving from the mainland was met at the ship by a member of the vice squad. After she was fingerprinted but before she received her license, she was in-

structed in the rules that would govern her stay on Hotel Street:

She may not visit Waikiki Beach or any other beach except Kailua Beach (a beach across the mountains from Honolulu).

She may not patronize any bars or better class cafés.

She may not own property or an automobile.

She may not have a steady "boyfriend" or be seen on the streets with any men.

She may not marry service personnel. She may not attend dances or visit golf courses.

She may not ride in the front seat of a taxicab or with a man in the back seat.

She may not wire money to the mainland without permission of the madam.

She may not telephone the mainland without permission of the madam.

She may not change from one house to another. She may not be out of the brothel after 10:30 at night.[8]

. . . To break these rules was to risk a beating at the hands of the police and possible removal from the islands.

Before the war, few white women served in the houses for more than six months before they returned to the West Coast. The Honolulu service, while lucrative, was not paradise. A few months was often all a woman could take. Some probably earned what money they had hoped for and left the trade. One "sporting girl," writing at the time, said that the police forced prostitutes to leave the islands after about six months "whether the girl's record was up to standard or not . . . [because] she got to know too much in that length of time." Once a prostitute left Hawaii the police prohibited her from returning for a year.[9]

Not all the prostitutes in the Hotel Street district were white. At the Bronx, which was one of the largest houses during the war years, approximately twenty-five prostitutes worked. About half were white women from the mainland and the other half local women. Five of the women were Hawaiian or part Hawaiian. Two were Puerto Rican. The Bronx also had six Japanese prostitutes, which was highly unusual and probably due to Tomi Abe, the Japanese-American woman who ran the Bronx during the war. Most of the madams were white women from the mainland, with names like "Norma Lane," "Peggy Staunton," and "Molly O'Brian." The owners of the buildings in which the brothels operated were almost all Chinese or Chinese American, but almost none were actively involved in running the brothels.[10]

A less fully regulated set of brothels existed across the river—a very narrow river—from the Hotel Street district. Brothels such as the "Local Rooms" were staffed by local women [of color] only, and charged lower prices. Despite their cheaper rates these brothels were much less popular, for their venereal disease rates were astronomical. Men referred to the prostitutes as "white meat" or "dark meat."

During the war, most of the brothels only served white men. Before the war, the brothels had also maintained a color line, but of a more complicated soft. The major Hotel Street brothels used a two-door system, one for whites (almost all of whom were soldiers and sailors) and the other for local men. This segregated system, in a city where segregation was not commonplace, was aimed at the servicemen. Many were Southern, most had been raised with racist beliefs. Some did not like to think of colored men preceding them in the vagina or mouth of a prostitute. Because the district was rough, and the men likely to be drunk and easily moved to violence, segregation was deemed the safest policy.

With the influx of servicemen and war workers following Pearl Harbor, demand for prostitutes soared. With so many white men lining up outside the brothels, the two-door policy was abandoned for the duration and men of color were simply not served. A couple of brothels in the district did not observe a color line and were open to all who could pay. But almost always the men of color had to pay more.

The color line, as far as the white servicemen and war workers saw it, ran only in one direction. While they did not want to share prostitutes with men of color, some white men preferred the "exotic" women.

While the regulated brothels of Hotel Street had been lucrative, thriving businesses through the 1920s and 1930s, the war changed the scale of success. War conditions presented an amazing economic opportunity to the sex workers of Hotel Street. During the war, approximately 250 prostitutes were registered

with the Honolulu Police Department—as "entertainers." They paid $1 a year for their licenses, and could make $30,000–$40,000 a year when the average working woman was considered fortunate to make $2,000. The houses took in over $10 million each during the war years, and the twenty-five to thirty madams who ran and/or owned them each took away between $150,000 and $450,000 every year. As a group, the prostitutes and madams of Hotel Street were incredibly successful economically.

But the conditions of sale, "$3 for 3 minutes," suggests how hard they must have worked. Most houses enforced a quota for each woman of 100 men a day, at least twenty days out of every month. The risks of sexually transmitted diseases were extremely high; in 1943, 120 professional prostitutes were hospitalized 166 times for a contagious venereal disease. A bad dose put the woman into the hospital—she had to go—for at least two weeks.[11]

Some women could accept the physically brutal and health-threatening conditions. They fixed their attention on the payoff. Others found the life, the numbers of men, and the social contempt degrading. Many sought distance from what they did by shooting morphine or by smoking opium. . . . Opiates gave them back some of the feelings of inviolability their roles as prostitutes worked to take from them.

During the war, even more than before, the women of Hotel Street did their best to exercise as much practical control as they could over their punishing livelihood and over the men who paid them for their services. First of all, the brothels were all owned and operated by women. The prostitutes maximized their economic control by allowing no pimps and there were no behind-the-scenes male owners. Even the doorkeepers at the brothels were women, often powerfully built women of Hawaiian descent. While the brothels existed for men, women controlled access.

The men who wanted sex had to wait in line, sometimes for hours, and in full public view. Because the curfew limited brothel hours, all of this took place only during daylight hours. From souvenir shops and beauty parlors and upstairs windows, the older Chinese women of the district watched and laughed at the lines of white men. Lines were generally quiet, but the shoeshine boys kidded the men who seemed visibly nervous, and quite a few of the men were drunk. But those who fortified themselves with drink faced a further obstacle: the women who kept door at the brothels rejected any man they did not trust to behave properly or to perform quickly. Adeline Naniole, the Hawaiian woman who kept door at the Bronx through part of the war, kept out any man who seemed too drunk. . . . "I don't think you can make business," she would say.[12]

Inside, the system was streamlined for maximum efficiency and control. At the head of the hall that led to the prostitutes' cubicles, a madam stood behind a money booth. Some of the booths were caged; there was no pretense that the houses offered gracious entertainment. The madam collected $3, almost always in singles, and gave the man a token, usually a poker chip. He then waited for an available woman.[13]. . .

Even in the sex act, most men felt little control. That was partly due to the setup: in the interest of time, women rotated from room to room; thus, no time was lost in cleaning up and waiting for the man to dress. When a man's turn came, he went into a cubicle—a regular room divided in half by a flimsy sheet of plywood or wall board that reached only two-thirds of the way to the ceiling. The room was bare except for a single cot, a table with a wash bowl, and a wastebasket. Sometimes, if the maids had been overwhelmed by the pace of business, soiled towels littered the floor. Often the man undressed and waited alone while the prostitute finished up in the cubicle on the other side of the half wall. The man could hear what went on the other side, and he knew that he would be heard in turn.

As time was money, and three minutes was the limit, prostitutes used various strategies to control the sex act itself. After quickly inspecting and washing the man's genitals (as a patron of other brothels described the routine):

> She'd lay on her back and get you on top of her so fast, you wouldn't even know you'd come up there on your own power. She'd grind so that you almost felt like you had nothing to do with it. Well, after that, she had you. She could make it go off as quickly as she wanted to. . . .[14]

About a quarter of the men chose fellatio, a fact that worried the senior shore-patrol officer in charge of the district, for he believed

that "it is not a far cry from such sex perversions ["buccal coitus," he termed it] to homosexual acts."[15] The women, their minds on the lines outside their doors and always seeking control, seemed to prefer fellatio—it was quicker. For many of the men, sexually inexperienced and fresh from months at sea or long weeks in a battle zone, three minutes was more than enough. As one veteran recalls, "They put it in and they're gone. Sometimes they're gone washing off in the pail. . . ."[16]

Despite the impersonal efficiency of the system, it could break down. One regular customer told his favorite, a half-Chinese, half-Mexican prostitute, at the end of a three-minute session, "Judy, you're the bummest fuck I ever had." As he tells it, she was so angry she spent the rest of the night proving him a liar—for free. It meant a lot; he named his daughter after her.[17] . . .

In the houses, men's money bought women's sexual favors; that was undeniable, and to that extent the men commanded and controlled the women. Women's bodies were commodified. Yet the system was structured to emphasize the women's control over the men. Standing in line, facing the doorkeeper, taking one's place in the day's quota of 100 anonymous acts: none of those experiences served to confirm a sense of male power or control. . . .

While the prostitutes and madams asserted control within the brothels during the war, it is perhaps more significant that they also attempted to challenge the larger system of controls and regulations within which they lived. After the Pearl Harbor attack the Hotel Street district, like much of the city, was shut down for a few weeks. Soon after the houses reopened, with the troops pouring through Honolulu and the men's pay upped from the prewar scale, the women raised their fee to $5 for three minutes. As they saw it, market conditions had changed.

Word of the price hike immediately reached Frank Steer, at that point an army major who had come to the islands in September 1940 to head the military police. Steer . . . served during the war as provost marshall under the state of martial law imposed on Hawaii after the Japanese attack. Under martial law, he had final authority over matters of vice. . . . Steer had no problem with the existence of brothels, but he did have a problem with the price hike. Raising prices on the fighting men was bad for morale and, as he saw it, unfair. Steer ordered the prices dropped: "The price of meat is still three dollars," he told the madams, and they backed down. They trusted Steer, and they knew he was their ally against the dictates of the police department. But though the prices returned to normal, Hotel Street business would not.

Right after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the women of the houses had rushed to the hospitals and temporary facilities set up for the burned and wounded men. Some of those who came to help were turned away when they admitted their occupations or gave their addresses—the official reason was fear of infection. But more than a few prostitutes nursed the men and did what they could to help. The madams turned over the brothels' living quarters to the overflow of wounded, and for a few days Hotel Street looked like a Red Cross annex.[18]

With their beds filled—and with normal lines of authority disrupted—the women took a chance. They moved out of the district and out of the shadows. They bought and leased houses all around Honolulu—up the rises (mountain slopes), down by the beaches, in fashionable neighborhoods. They told anyone who asked that the district was too risky, that it was a firetrap if the Japanese came back. The explanation was not just a cover; many on the islands believed invasion was imminent. Several prostitutes passed up the promised boom times and joined other women, longtime residents and wives of army and navy officers, who arranged passage on the 20 December special evacuation transport bound for San Francisco.

For several weeks, even as the brothels reopened and long after the wounded had moved out of the prostitutes' living quarters, no one seemed to pay any attention to the women's quiet movement out of the district. The women of Hotel Street, long subject to the dictates of the vice squad, had reason to hope that those days were over.[19]

At first, the women who had moved out of the district attracted little attention; gradually that changed. One businesswoman worked out a lucrative scheme: through an agent, she would buy a house in a fashionable neighborhood and then make clear to her neighbors what her line of work was. The investments paid off handsomely and rapidly, as

the neighbors banded together to buy her out—at a premium.[20]

Other women, their minds less on business than on pleasure, simply began to enjoy their earnings. They flouted the rules—rules that had not been officially relaxed—appearing in "respectable" public places, having "wild" parties, doing as they wished. The military police, under martial law holding more authority than the civilian police, let such behavior pass.[21]

The police, especially their chief, William Gabrielson, were outraged at the new order of things. Prostitutes had invaded every neighborhood. Hawaii's carefully calibrated social stratification was being mocked. Mainland whores—white women—were out in public, demonstrating how little difference white skin had to mean in the way of moral superiority or some sort of "natural" right to rule the majority of Hawaii's people of darker hues. Already the hordes of working-class white soldiers, sailors, and war workers had damaged the equilibrium that gave stability to the island's ruling white elite. Now the white prostitutes made a mockery of the whole racist and racialist system. Their too-public presence signaled to all who watched that one set of controls was being challenged. The prostitutes' rejection of hierarchy seemed a foreshadowing of what could happen on a larger scale politically, economically, and culturally after the war. Worse yet, supporting the new laissez-faire approach to the prostitutes was General Emmons, the military governor. . . .

For General Emmons, and for Major Steer, maintaining orderly troops, low rates of venereal diseases, and a reasonably high morale superseded long-range thinking about racial or ethnic boundaries and the elite's postwar control of the islands. . . . The men, judging by the hundreds of thousands of them who went up and down the Hotel Street brothel stairs in the months after the Pearl Harbor attack, wanted prostitutes. The regulated brothels supplied the prostitutes and ensured that they were relatively disease-free (the Hawaii military district had the lowest venereal disease rates in the armed forces). The prostitutes had nursed the wounded and given over their rooms after Pearl Harbor. They had accepted the command not to raise their prices. Many high-ranking military officers believed that "any man who won't fuck, won't fight"; they saw the women of Hotel Street as important to morale and to maintaining a manly spirit among the "boys."[22] All in all, Emmons, Steer, and others who played a role in enforcing martial law believed that keeping the prostitutes safe from needless harassment and hypocritical near-bondage was a commonsense way of keeping the more or less disease-free houses operating smoothly under what were obviously extraordinary conditions.

The matter came to a head quickly. In April of 1942, chief of police Gabrielson ordered his men to evict four prostitutes living together in a house in Waikiki, one of the areas most strictly off-limits to prostitutes in the prewar years. Waikiki before the war was not the bustling tourist center it would become. It was an exclusive resort for the well-to-do, and Jews and people of color knew better than to try to stay in any of its three luxurious hotels. Although a mixture of Hawaii's ethnic/racial groups lived in its residential section, Waikiki was carefully maintained as a respectable area. The war had changed Waikiki: tourism halted for the duration, and servicemen had taken over even one of the exclusive hotels. At least a few of the Hotel Street prostitutes saw an opportunity in wartime Waikiki—for pleasure, if not for profit.

When Gabrielson's man told the women to leave, they complained to Captain Benson of the military police, who seemed well acquainted with their affairs. He told them that the police did not run things anymore, and that his commander did not care where they lived as long as they did not ply their trade outside the Hotel Street district. All this was relayed to Gabrielson, whose angry queries were met with official but vague statements that the military police would take care of such issues in the future.[23]

Gabrielson, angry but thinking strategically, issued Administrative Order No. 83, acknowledging the military control of vice in Honolulu. He then had the memo leaked to the Honolulu *Star-Bulletin*. He wanted to watch the military squirm.

To reiterate what must have slipped many minds in the face of the public and highly regulated system, prostitution was illegal in Honolulu. It was also outlawed through the federal-level May Act, which . . . stated that the federal government would, where local officials were unwilling or unable to do the job themselves,

stamp out prostitution aimed at the servicemen. The May Act was not just window-dressing; it was rigorously enforced throughout the country. Though most of the military administration in Hawaii preferred the regulated brothels to what they saw as the alternative, more dangerous system, no one wanted to take the credit for running the brothels and breaking federal law—least of all General Emmons, the military governor of Hawaii. . . .

In a letter to Police Chief Gabrielson . . . Emmons made his position clear:

> I desire to inform you that your understanding regarding the responsibility for vice conditions in the City and County of Honolulu is in error. . . . No directive had been issued to the Police Department in any way limiting its responsibility for any phase of law enforcement. . . . Cancel Administrative Order No. 83.

Chief Gabrielson, with pleasure, resumed control. But the issue had been settled only on the administrative level. The MPs and the vice squad continued to skirmish, with the vice squad trying to round the women up and return them to their living quarters in the quarter, and the MPs undermining those efforts whenever possible. The MPs told the women they were within their rights.

The women of Hotel Street were caught in the middle. They did not want to go back to the prewar order. It was one thing to choose to service 100 men a day, but it was another to abide by rules that denied them their basic freedoms. They framed the issues that way, and they went on strike.[24]

For close to three weeks in June of 1942 a group of prostitutes walked a picket line outside the police department headquarters, which was just a few blocks from the district. The police headquarters also housed Major Steer and his MPs. The women carried placards protesting their treatment and the rules that restricted their freedoms. This strike was not for better pay but for better treatment, for fuller rights of citizenship.

While no documentation of their *specific* arguments at that time exists, a clear line of reasoning appears in an angry appeal to Honolulu's citizens written by a prostitute in the fall of 1944. In it, she asserted her right to freedom of movement and to adequate police protection, basing her claims on a traditional liberal concept of citizenship. "We pay some of the highest taxes in this town," she wrote. "Where, I ask you, are the beneficial results of our taxes?"

This woman and many of her coworkers believed they were doing vital war work. In addition to the obvious but controversial contributions, the prostitutes had acquitted themselves well after the Pearl Harbor attack and had been willing participants in war-bond drives. One madam had received a special citation from Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morganthau for selling $132,000 in war bonds, most of them, no doubt, to fellow sex workers. The prostitutes believed their good citizenship and patriotism should be recognized as such.[25]

The striking prostitutes gambled that the military police would keep the police department from using force against them and that their military supporters would back them up. What they did took courage, for they had no public allies.

Establishment Hawaii did its best to ignore the strike, and the newspapers carried not a single word about it. General Emmons, however, saw the situation as both embarrassing and serious, and moved quickly to resolve it. . . . Though he had the power under martial law to order the police to do as he wanted, he instead argued his case in what one participant called a "constructive and cooperative" manner. His arguments were simple and straightforward, avoiding the complicated terrains of morality and the political order and focusing instead on the women's working conditions. He said that "the girls are overworked and need periods of rest; that their work is not during daylight hours; that formerly they could go to the Coast for a rest and could be replaced by new girls arriving by steamer; that this is not possible today." Emmons also offered, on behalf of the military, to take over the unpleasant task of ensuring that the women had their regular medical checkups and inspecting the houses for breaches of the sanitary code. The police department, he assured all concerned, would have the right to enforce all other laws and regulations that applied to the women. The police commission and Chief Gabrielson, who really had little choice in the matter, accepted the compromise. The prostitutes ended their strike. Their right to appear in public and to live outside the brothels, while fragile, was won.[26]

Ultimately, the struggle over Hotel Street was not played out in terms of gender, or even

with the prostitutes as players. As the prostitutes had seen an opportunity in the context between the military government and the police department, which acted as an agent of the traditional *haole* elite, so too another group saw an opportunity in the divided lines of authority. During the war years a new elite was taking shape, drawn largely from the more liberal range of the *haole* community. By mid-1944, with Hawaii completely out of harm's way and Allied victory seemingly a matter of time, some in Hawaii had begun to look to the future, toward statehood and economic development.

In trying to orchestrate Hawaii's future and maneuver toward statehood, [they] worried about ungovernable prostitutes and regulated brothels. Open prostitution somehow seemed to confirm mainland stereotypes of Hawaii as a primitive, licentious place populated by dark-skinned "natives."... One of the [group's] earliest goals was to demolish the unbridled vice district.

The Social Protection Committee of the Honolulu Council of Social Agencies [which] led the way in fighting the regulated brothel system ... resembled the kind of well-educated, modern reformers who had closed down regulated brothel systems in dozens of American cities during the Progressive Era.[27] On 1 August 1944, the committee issued a bulletin, "Prostitution in Honolulu," that described (in absolutely untitillating prose) the Hotel Street system. The bulletin included a map that showed where every known prostitute in Honolulu lived. The message was clear: the prostitutes live in YOUR neighborhood.[28]...

As military control waned, the first phase of the antiprostitution campaign went into effect. All prostitutes were ordered to vacate houses in residential areas and to move back into the district, to the houses in which "they carry on their trade." News of this dictate was carried in the Honolulu newspapers.[29]

One month after the prostitutes had been ordered back into the district, Governor Stainback joined the antiprostitution campaigns, ... in part, as [a way of] attack[ing] military control [and, in part, as an effort to link] interests with the progressive elite.... On 21 September 1944, in one of his first major reversals of military policy, Governor Stainback ordered the regulated brothels shut down. The Social Protection Committee had maneuvered very cleverly, using their greatest weapon: publicity, or at least the threat of publicity. In letters to Admiral Nimitz, Admiral Furlong, and General Richardson, the committee asked whether each supported the system of regulated brothels. The admirals and the general replied, in writing, that they did not support the system. This was, of course, official policy, even though military practice was quite different. When Stainback closed the brothels, the military offered no resistance. A public debate about the issue, in the face of a determined campaign by an influential group of citizens, was not something anyone in the armed forces could weather. The leaders of the Social Protection Committee knew that.[30]

The actual closing of the brothels went smoothly. On 22 September three uniformed members of the vice squad visited the brothels during working hours, between 11 A.M. and 1:30 P.M. The madams had already heard about the governor's order issued the day before and so had the customers. Business had virtually come to a halt in most houses. The vice-squad officers informed the madams that after 2 P.M. any acts of prostitution committed on their premises would subject them to arrest. The prostitutes were told not to practice their trade, in the houses or elsewhere, and to move out of the district as soon as possible.

According to newspaper reports, many of the prostitutes welcomed the end of an era, and not without humor. One greeted the announcement that she could not longer "practice prostitution" with the old witticism, "I don't practice, I'm an expert." Another woman, wearing "an abbreviated red apron, short-short skirt and a pair of cowboy riding boots," gave a loud "whoopie" at the news. Madams took the news in a variety of ways.... But in general the[y] seemed to feel they had little about which to complain. One, and probably not the most successful, had voluntarily paid taxes on an income of $383,000 in 1943.... No one had expected the wartime boom to last; most prostitutes and madams had only meant to make the most money they could while it lasted. With the new clampdown in effect, some prostitutes left Honolulu as soon as they could arrange transportation back to the mainland. [Others continued to work outside of brothels.]...

The struggle of the Honolulu prostitutes, in retrospect, was charged not only by the usual issues surrounding illicit sex trade and

lines of authority, but by concerns specific to prestatehood Hawaii. The women who made such claims on the citizens of Hawaii were white women, and their public presence and vocal demands called into question all the associations of race and gender and the ideology of the purity of white women to be defended against the sexual threat of colored races that were implicit and sometimes explicit in underpinning Hawaii's social structure. In the history of prostitution in America, many have justified the "sacrifice" of lower-class women to "protect" the purity of women of the middle and upper classes. The system in Hawaii was in many ways similar, except that race played a crucial role, and the racial lines were more complex in Hawaii than on the mainland. The public struggles—and yes, excesses—of these "impure" white women called the whole ideological system into question.

At least in small part the system had been dependent on the complicity of the white prostitutes. The prostitutes were seen as a means to keep the low-status white service personnel and the plantation workers sexually satisfied. It was crucial to the system that the prostitutes not claim any public role in Hawaii. In fact, in exchange for a great deal of money, the prostitutes (despite their white skin) were supposed to accept total pariah status. They were not to live or visit outside the vice district; they were supposed to remain silent and hidden. They could amass capital but they could not exercise their economic power in Hawaii. They were required to return to the mainland. But with their strike and with the aid of the military government, the prostitutes had demanded—and in part had gotten—the rights economic power normally guaranteed in the United States. . . .

The prostitutes' strike was only one small and indirect part of a larger movement toward a more pluralistic postwar society in Hawaii. But it is especially significant because it brought together issues of race and gender in such a way that it worked to undermine the ideology of racial superiority. White prostitutes demanded full rights of citizenship, and while the very public fact of their race had, in some small way, helped to undermine Hawaii's racial hierarchy, their race was not sufficient to guarantee their rights. Instead, the public power they were able to display for a short while in wartime Hawaii depended on the utility the federal authorities found in them.

The prostitutes' temporary victory—their ability to emerge from the dangerous shadows and to operate as legitimate, fully protected war workers—could not have happened without the intervention of the State, in the form of the military government. The concern of the federally authorized participants was not with the rights of prostitutes (though several seemed to have some respect or liking for members of the profession), but with winning the war. [What that] intervention . . . signaled [was] the increased and continuing willingness of the federal government to impose its nationally minded agendas upon local entities. . . . The ways in which socially marginal groups like the prostitutes of Hotel Street could succeed in furthering their struggles by publicly aligning themselves with the relatively autonomous federal government's often mercurial concerns would become an ever-more critical characteristic of social change movements in the postwar years.

Notes

1. Herman Gist, interviewed by David Farber, Germantown, Md., Dec. 1989.

2. Barbara Meils Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue: The Politics of Prostitution and the American Reform Tradition* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

3. Memo from Commissioner Houston to the Honolulu Police Commission, "Abatement of Houses of Prostitution in the City and County of Honolulu" (n.d. [1 Sept. 1941?]), Lawrence M. Judd Papers ([hereafter cited] LJ), Hawaii State Archives (HA).

4. Quoted by James Cummings in a letter to Dr. Theodore Richards, 11 July 1944, "Prostitution" file, Governor Stainback Papers, HA.

5. "Why Talk about Prostitution," *Hawaii* (31 July 1944):5.

6. Eric A. Funnel, "Venereal Disease Control: A Bedtime Story," *Hawaii Medical Journal* (Nov.–Dec. 1942):67–71; Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue*.

7. Frank Steer interviewed by David Farber, Kailua, Oahu, Hawaii, June 1989; Brian Nicol, "Interview with Col. Frank Steer," *Honolulu* (Nov. 1981):83.

8. Jean O'Hara, "My Life as a Honolulu Prostitute," (n.p. [Nov. 1944?]), Hawaii Collection of the University of Hawaii (HC-UH), pp. 15–16.

9. Ibid., pp. 15–18.

10. Letter to Governor Stainback by Senator Alice Kamokila Campbell, 5 Feb. 1945, "Prostitution" folder, Governor Stainback Papers (GS), HA.

11. Social Protection Committee, *Prostitution in Honolulu, Bulletin* 1 (1 Aug. 1944):2–3.

12. Quote from former brothel employee Adeline Naniole, interviewed by Vivian Lee, 2 March 1979, Women Workers in Pineapple, Ethnic Studies Oral History Project, University of Hawaii, p. 769;

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FOURTH EDITION

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New York Oxford
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
1995