BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Ernest Kapuamailani Kai

Ernest Kapuamailani Kai was born February 11, 1905 in Hilo, Hawai‘i. He was educated at Hilo High School, Punahou School, University of Hawai‘i, Yale College, and Yale Law School.

Kai worked for the law firm Heen and Godbold from 1931 to 1934. He was appointed to the following territorial positions: registrar of public assets and assistant treasurer, 1934 to 1936; auditor, 1936 to 1938; assistant attorney general, 1938 to 1941; attorney general, 1942; and secretary (at that time, Hawai‘i’s second highest office), 1942 to 1944. He served as acting governor on several occasions while in office as the territorial secretary.

Kai left office to practice law with a firm that was later called Heen, Kai, Dodge and Evensen. He retired from the firm in 1971.

Kai died in 1990.
Joy Chong: The following is a new interview. It's with Ernest Kai, K-A-I. It took place on May 11, 1988, at the Kai residence, and the interviewers were, again, Chris Conybeare and Dan Tuttle.

CC: We're rolling now, so why don't we start the way we have all of them, and basically, this is another in our series of political oral history interviews, [this] with Mr. Ernest Kai. This interview is being conducted on May 11, 1988 and it's not to be released until after Mr. Kai's death. That's our agreement and that's on the tape and on the record right now and we will confirm that in writing later, but, this tape is embargoed until after your death.

EK: Thank you.

CC: I won't release it to anyone. Our staff will be the only people that have access to it. Mr. Kai, I'm going to start with the way we have everybody else we've talked to and maybe you can tell us a little bit about your early background. Where and when were you born and what were your parents' circumstance at that time?

EK: I was born in Hilo on February 11, 1905. Hilo then was a very comfortable small town, where you got to know everybody. My parents were relatively well-to-do, part-Hawaiians. My father [John Kikai Kai] was a businessman and also a very staunch Republican. Yes, he was county committee chairman, I think you call it. At that time, he served in the house of representatives in 1920s and later on served as county clerk. My mother [Annie (Akamu) Kai] was a schoolteacher. She was educated at the Mid-Pacific Institute here in Honolulu in those early days and taught second grade at the then [Hilo] Union School in Hilo.

I was educated in Hilo under good circumstances. My mother and my father were determined that I should have a good education. And so, they filled our home with a lot of books in our library so I did a lot of reading. All my brothers did. See, I had five brothers, one sister who died when she was a year and a half old. Well, I studied at the Hilo High School. I graduated in three years [in 1921]. I accelerated my studies and graduated with a, I guess you call it an A grade. So, being a youngster then, graduating in three years, I thought I should go to Punahou.

But before going to Punahou, I should tell you a little bit about my background. Hilo was a
I grew up in a very small town and my parents were, as I told you, interested in getting me to know about my Hawaiian background and also my Chinese background. So, I learned a lot about the ali`i side of both my mother’s parents and grandparents and my father’s. My father came from what they call the kapu ali`i, very strong ali`i family from the Ka`u area. And on my mother’s side, they weren’t high chiefs but they were chiefs in Hilo, and one of them served as the konohiki to John Young, who, as you know, was very close to King Kamehameha the First.

So, with that background, oh, also, on my Chinese side, the Chinese that came here did not come as coolies. They came here to make sugar in the 1830s. Quite interesting. On my father’s side, they came here to make sugar in the 1830s in Hilo. On my mother’s side, they came here in the [18]50s to go into business. They were all closely—these Chinese were all friends of the Chinese all over Hawai`i at that time. You take the Afongs, the Akas, the Lau Fais, and later on the Hapais. But they were all well-educated and wealthy Chinese who came here. So much for that.

So, as I look back on it, my mother was interested in having me learn— in addition to studying, she gave me hula lessons, so we had hula masters teaching my brothers and myself. And I also went to dancing school, interestingly enough, and also joined the Boy Scout.

CC: Excuse me sir, with all the books and your mother being a teacher and your father being involved in politics as a Republican, did you talk about the issues and things of the day at home? Did you ever . . .

EK: No, no. No, my father kept his politics outside of the home, which I think was good because at that point, my family background was very Royalist. My grandaunt . . .

DT: I was going to ask about that.

EK: My grandaunt was, her name was Mrs. Joseph [Emma] Nawahi. She was lady-in-waiting to Queen Lili`uokalani. And her husband, my granduncle, was minister of foreign affairs under Lili`uokalani. So, whenever the queen would come to Hilo, she’d stay with my aunt. My aunt was very wealthy. And there would be great parties and luau [lā`au], singing and dancing. And I met the queen; got to know her. And she knew my family. So, all through my youth, I was, well, I wasn’t urged but I was made aware of the fact that our feeling was with the royalty.

DT: You weren’t interested in restoration of the crown or anything of that sort or . . .

EK: My grandaunt was . . .

DT: She was.

EK: . . . very strongly so. She owned a newspaper, published a newspaper in Hilo and devoted it largely to the Royalist movement.

DT: I see.

EK: Anyway, so much for that. I went to Punahou and graduated there [in 1922] with A average
and I wanted to go, my family wanted me to go away to school because I showed, what you
may call, I showed evidence of being a good student. Well, I was planning to go to Stanford,
but, at that point, my parents did not have enough money. So I went to [the] University of
Hawai‘i for two years. Then, I had worked on the side, saved some money. I was ready to go
to Stanford. But, my uncle, Noa Aluli, who was a prominent attorney here and a very close
friend of Prince [Jonah] Kūhiō [Kalaniana‘ole], he had done some postgraduate work at Yale.
He said, “If you’re going away to the Mainland for an education, why don’t you go to Yale.”

I said, “Well, I can’t afford it.”

He said, “I’ll get you a scholarship.”

So apparently he talked to Herman Von Holt, as I remember, and John Galt, who was then
the head of the Hawaiian Trust Company and also a Yale man. His two sons, [Charles Lunt]
Carter Galt, Jack [John] Galt went to Yale. And they were all-American football players at
that time with [Joseph] Atherton Gilman and Paul Livingston, all-American football players
from Harvard. So I got into Yale. And, of course [when] I got in, I lost a year. Instead of
being a junior, they accepted me as a sophomore. I had one of the most wonderful times in
my life there at Yale, making lots of friends. Of course, being [a] very strange character on
the campus, being the only dark-skinned person with all the Haoles there, but I got to know
all of them because I spoke English very well. I did very well there, so I made many, many
friends. But I devoted myself primarily to studying, although I did enter all sports. I tried
football, I tried track, swimming, water polo. But those young men over there were too
far—too good for me.

DT: Didn’t get involved in any classroom politics, like class president or class secretary . . .

EK: No, no.

DT: . . . either in high school or in college?

EK: No. Well, in high school, I did, yes, of course, I did.

DT: Oh, you did.

EK: I served as an officer of our class there in Hilo High.

DT: At Punahou, no . . .

EK: Punahou, no, because I was just a one-year student there. Well, to make a long story short, I
graduated from Yale [in 1927], Phi Beta Kappa and Magna Cum Laude, which is very
unusual for someone from Honolulu. I think at that time, I was the only one of Hawaiian
ancestry that finished Yale completely and also graduated with honors, you see. So, I came
back to Honolulu to look for a job. And, that was just about the time of the big depression . . .

DT: Now this was after . . .

EK: The big stock market crash in 1929.
DT: Now you got a bachelor's degree from Yale. Then you went along to get a law degree.

EK: I went to law school. Yeah, when I came back on Honolulu in 1927, I couldn't get a job. So I decided, well, the heck with it, why don't I go and take up some profession where I'd be my own boss. So I asked the Yale Alumni Association here if they would give me another scholarship for law school, and sure enough they did. So I graduated in 1930 and came home. But if you recall, the stock market crash of 1929 was a tremendous crash. A lot of my classmates in school, their parents were in stock, they were stockbrokers in New York, committed suicide. So, it was terrible. I came back here, home, of course, I couldn't get a job as a lawyer. (Chuckles) Went around to all the big firms.

DT: Bad times.

EK: You know, the times were getting tough and hard. Well, finally Judge [William H.] Heen was impressed, apparently, with my background, he said, "Well, Mr. Kai," he said, "Ernie," he said, "I really don't need another lawyer, but I want you to stay with us." He said, "Do you mind if you just sat on fifty dollars a month?"

I said, "I'll start on anything." So I started with Judge Heen as a law clerk [in the firm of Heen and Godbold]. And it was there where I got my start in politics. I became a Democrat.

DT: Had he been a judge by that time?

EK: Oh, he'd already been a judge [1917-1919].

DT: He'd already been a judge. What type of judge? Circuit court judge?

EK: He was a circuit court judge.

DT: Circuit court judge. Not a district magistrate.

EK: No, no, no.

DT: He'd been a circuit court judge even before this time, then?

EK: Right.

DT: So he was quite a bit older than you were?

EK: Oh, much older.

DT: Established, uh huh.

CC: Did you have to think about this proposition of becoming a Democrat, coming from a good Republican family or . . .

EK: Well . . .

CC: How did that work?
EK: Well, it worked pretty good because after a while, Governor [Joseph B.] Poindexter sort of took notice of me and so did Mr. [William C.] McGonagle. Mr. McGonagle then was treasurer of Hawaiʻi and the bank. I can't think of the bank. . . . That went kaput, but, it was bankrupt. And he needed a lawyer, assistant treasurer, to handle the liquidation of the Chinese American Bank [in 1933].

CC: Chinese American Bank.

EK: Right, that's it. So, I was approached to see whether I'd be willing to go into government service and give up law practice for a while, and that's just what I wanted because I thought now with that experience, you go into politics.

DT: So you did have an idea of getting into politics?

EK: Absolutely. I just thought that with all my background, I had in the back of my mind that someday I wanted to be governor of Hawaiʻi, you know. I felt I was qualified. So, I joined McGonagle's staff as treasurer, assistant treasurer [in 1934], and deputy registrar of public accounts they call it, and helped them liquidate the Chinese American Bank, rejuvenate it. Now, it's the— I think it's the American Security Bank.

DT: It could well be, yeah.

EK: Yeah, I think so. So, anyway, I served very well under McGonagle. As a matter of fact, right there, there was an interesting incident. I had married my wife Peggy [Margaret Wanless Hockley], then. She was an anthropologist. She graduated from Yale, also. And I had met her and was going to get married to her, and then McGonagle said, "You know, as a wedding present I'd love to give you a membership to the Oʻahu Country Club."

I said, "Well, I don't play golf. Tennis, I play tennis. I love tennis. I belong to the Beretania Tennis Club."

He said, "That's all right." He said, "Might be useful to you sometime in the future." So he put my name up. Well, of course, you know, he caused quite a controversy.

DT: It was a very radical step at that time.

EK: They were opposing—why, wait, why, wait. Who is this Ernest Kai (chuckles), you know. Well, anyway, McGonagle and my friend Arthur C. Shoen who comes from Hilo, were my sponsors. And they worked hard. And somehow, I don't know how or what they did, but they finally got these opponents satisfied that I'd be a good member. So, I became a member of the Oʻahu Country Club in 1936. And today I'm an honorary member of the Oʻahu Country Club because I've been a member of there for over fifty years, you see. And during that course of time I've served on the board of directors and became president in 1961 which is quite something, you see. (Chuckles)

DT: Yeah, that was probably a more prestigious club than the Waiʻalae [Country] Club was at that time.

EK: At that time, no question about it. The Waiʻalae Country Club wasn't formed until 1942.
DT: Okay, okay. That's what I have here.

EK: You see. So anyway, that, to me, was an interesting incident. Well, nevertheless, let's get back to the state government, I mean territorial government. So, at that time, the auditor of Hawai'i was a person by the name of [Francis H.] Alapaki Smith. I don't know whether you know him, but he had apparently taken a drink and didn't tend to business so the governor called me, Governor [Joseph] Poindexter. He said, "Ernie," he said, "I want you to do me a favor. Will you go over and become auditor of Hawai'i and reorganize that department?"

I said, "Governor, I'm a lawyer. I know nothing about accounting."

He said, "You can hire the accountant. You just go over there and reorganize that department."

So, okay, I resign as the assistant treasurer and the deputy registrar of public accounts and went to the auditor's department and reorganized it [in 1936]. It took me two years. I took trips to the Mainland. As a matter of fact, on one trip I went to Nebraska to look into the unicameral system, because they were the only state at that time [that] had the unicameral system.

DT: Nineteen thirty-three, I think they adopted it.

EK: And Senator Harold Rice, you remember him?

DT: Right.

EK: He wanted some information on it because he thought that there was a lot of waste of effort and money, time, in having a two-body system. So I came back with a report, which was a good report and I thought it was excellent. It would save the territory a lot of money, a lot of time, but Harold Rice could not put it over. Well, anyway, after that, I was about ready to resign, because I had finished my work there.

Well, there was a vacancy up at the attorney general's office as assistant to the attorney general, to Joe [Joseph] Hodgson. You remember Joe Hodgson?

DT: No, I don't.

EK: Well, anyway, he's attorney general [1938–1942]. Governor says, "How would you like that position?"

I said, "I'd love it. But I don't want to stay too long. I want to get back into private practice in town."

"Well," he said, "come on up there anyway." So, I went up to the attorney general's office, became assistant to the attorney general, the number two man [in 1938].

DT: Were you there when he did his famous Hodgson report on the Hilo incident on the docks? Were you ...
EK: You mean, the . . .

DT: Well, the shooting of the demonstrators at Hilo docks, in 1938. Mr. Hodgson did a famous report on the incident.

EK: No, let’s see. No, I was not there. Nineteen . . . I went to the treasurer’s office in 1934.

DT: Thirty . . .

EK: To the auditor’s in 1936, and the AG’s office in 1938. I must have gone in after the report because I don’t recall it at all.

Well, I stayed at the attorney general’s office until 1941, until the war broke out. And, the office was not as big as it is today.

DT: Well, of course not . . .

EK: But it was a small office, and a good office. Mr. Hodgson was a good attorney general, very fair and unbiased. When he gave you an opinion, it was not slighted politically. It was the law. And I enjoyed working with him because that’s the type of law that I could practice. Call the shots as they are. And that’s the way it’s supposed to be; you’re not supposed to be just the attorney for the governor.

Well, anyway, the war came along, and the day of December 7, I happen to be down at Ke‘ehi Lagoon. Rhoda Lewis [deputy attorney general, 1937–1959] was assisting me in condemnation of the Ke‘ehi Lagoon for a landing base for the navy. And, Joseph Hodgson had just left to go on a vacation to the Mainland of the United States. Well, of course, you know what happened that morning. The Japanese fleet came in and started to hit Pearl Harbor. Of course, we thought for a while they were just our planes, you know, maneuvering and practicing. When, of course, all of a sudden you see this huge black smoke and flames coming up. Then we realized something was wrong. So, we turned on our radio. All of us. There was Herbert Austin and his engineering staff there, and Miss Lewis and myself doing the legal work. And sure enough, Web [Webley] Edwards [manager of KGMB radio] came over [the radio] as everybody knows now, alerting us that we’re being attacked by [an] unknown foreign enemy at that point, enemy force. So, we broke up. The engineering staff took off, and I took off for the ‘Iolani Palace [at that time, the seat of the territorial government]. I told Rhoda Lewis, “Let’s hit the ‘Iolani Palace first because the governor may be there.” And of course, Edouard Doty, prior to December 7th, had been appointed head of the civilian defense [civil defense] at that point.

DT: Yeah, is this the Ed Doty who’s still operating or is it a relative of the Ed Doty . . .

EK: No.

DT: . . . who works for the Eagle Distributors, or no relation?

EK: No relation.

DT: No relation.
EK: I asked him. He said, "No relation."

DT: How did you spell his—last name spelled the same way?

EK: It was spelled the same. Edouard, E-D-O-U-A-R-D Doty.

DT: D-O-T-Y?

EK: His father [Rev. Jacob Lamb Doty] was an Episcopalian minister up in Hilo and he was part-Tahitian.

DT: I see.

EK: A very capable person.

DT: Well, we're going to have to change tapes, so if you'll pause just a little bit, we'll change the tapes and then we'll pick it up.

EK: Okay.

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

JC: The following is a continuation of the Ernest Kai interview. This is videotape number two.

DT: Get back and talk about some of the leading political figures of the 1930s, when you were serving as treasurer, assistant treasurer, auditor, assistant attorney general, and attorney general.

EK: Okay.

DT: I know one of them is Johnny [John H.] Wilson [Democrat mayor of Honolulu], undoubtedly.

EK: Oh, yes.

DT: Do you have any recollections there, and where he stood with respect to the party?

EK: Yes. Johnny Wilson was a very, very popular political figure, a Democrat, of course. He and his wife, Aunt Jennie. And then, of course, on the other hand, the Republicans had Marshal Wright. He was a power figure that, I mean not Marshal, but Mayor [George F.] Wright, who was a very powerful figure in the Republican party. Of course, among the Democrats were the conservatives, and that's Judge [Samuel] Kemp, or Poindexter, Judge [William] Heen, of course. Governor [Joseph] Poindexter. They were the old conservative type of Democrats.

DT: But Johnny Wilson didn't fit into this category, did he?

EK: No, he didn't fit into this category. These latter names that I've mentioned, they weren't active in politics but they were Democrats and wielded some influence, you see.
DT: Well, they were active. You said they weren't active in politics. They were active in politics, but not in a partisan sense?

EK: No, not in the sense of going out and electioneering.

DT: Oh, they do go out and electioneer, I see.

EK: No, no, but they were [the] power of politics in that they attended the meetings and they were well-respected. They were listened to. See, that was before the younger group came in, the [John] Burns group came in. And they sort of ran the party here, so to speak.

DT: So Johnny Wilson didn't run the Democratic party then?

EK: But he was very powerful, though.

DT: He was powerful . . .

EK: Because he was not only associated with that group, but he was actively out electioneering in order to get into public office, you see. Frank Fasi at that time came in, too. I remember.

DT: Little bit—well, that wasn't till 1950s, then.

EK: Yes, right. And Danny [Daniel K.] Inouye and Sparky [Spark M.] Matsunaga were a new group coming in.

DT: Right. But we're getting ahead of the story. Back in the [19]30s, it was essentially Johnny Wilson [who] was the only one, prominent Democrat, who was beating the bushes.

EK: Right.

DT: The rest of them were sort of surrounding the governor because of the New Deal administration, . . .

EK: That's right.

DT: . . . Hawai'i had an appointed governor.

EK: They were all close to Washington. You see, they were sort of Washingtonian Democrats who were implanted here, starting the Democratic party and keep it going.

DT: There must have been some other Democrats who were out working the precincts and . . .

EK: Oh, I'm sure there were.

DT: . . . beating the bushes.

EK: I'll have to refresh my recollections on that.

DT: What about the board of supervisors [predecessor to the Honolulu city council]?
Well, of course, on the board of supervisors, let's see, I don't know. I could name names, of course, there was Manuel [Pacheco], you see the name leaves me, but he was called the watchdog of the treasurer there. There was Noble Kauhane, there was, yeah, the name comes back. There was Noble Kauhane. There was Johnny Asing, see. And I guess, Manuel [Pacheco]. I can't think of his last name but he was very, very strong and prominent. Served as mayor for part of the time.

Excuse me. But the majority of the council was largely Republican, though, weren't they?

At that time, right.

And in terms of other Democrats in politics, wasn't David Trask's father [David Trask, Sr.] a Democrat?

Yes, yes, Arthur Trask father, David Trask, he was a senator. That's right, he and Judge [William] Heen were very, very strong in the senate. That's right.

But the Democratic party was small and, as you say, mostly associated with the Washington power.

With the power group.

And you were associated mostly with this Washington power, I guess?

With that group. Yes, 'cause that was the only group that was well formed and well knit at the time. Then gradually, the [Daniel] Inouye group, the [John] Burns group came in, you see. And then, of course, when Burns got the ILWU [International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union] to back him up, and labor to back him up, the party moved forward very strongly. Of course, there's another man who was very strong at that time. You remember Charles Kauhane?

Oh, yes, yes.

You see. Well, he was another very powerful and very . . .

This was back as far as the [19]30s?

Yes.

He was powerful.

Oh, yes.

When did [John] Burns enter the picture to the best of your recollection?

Well, he was delegate to Congress.

Well, he wasn't delegate to Congress until '56, so that was pretty late. What about the [19]30s and the [19]40s?
EK: As I recall, I believe, during World War II he backed up the 442nd [Regimental Combat Team] boys. I think he was with the police department at that time and backed up the boys and fought for them, as a matter of fact. He and General [Kendall J.] Fielder. Do you remember General Fielder?

DT: Mm hmm [yes].

EK: And there was one other person, I can't remember. Anyway, he had the support there for the 442nd and the 100th [Infantry] Battalion. Then they came back and formed the nucleus, I think, of his Democratic strength.

DT: Yeah, well, Burns did this as sort of a member of the police force, right?

EK: Yes.

DT: Because he was a policeman by profession.

EK: Right.

DT: When did he join the Democratic party? Did you know that? Or how did he get involved in the Democratic party? He might just as well have gotten involved in the Republican party because his brother, Ed [Edward Burns], was a Republican.

EK: Correct. I don't know. I don't know how he got involved. But anyway, he did get involved and became a delegate to Congress [in 1956] with the help of the 442nd and their friends, and of course, others.

DT: Yeah, later in the [19]50s. Let's go back to your period of the [19]40s now. Pearl Harbor Day leading up to . . .

EK: Yeah, well, of course I rushed home to the shells falling all around me. And one of my lawyer friends down around the corner here, a block and half, one of these shells landed on his home and killed him. I didn't know until later. But I rushed home here. Of course, [we] didn't have this big house here; it was a tiny little home here. I told my wife that we were being attacked by an unknown enemy force. And I said, probably Japan, you see. I said, "Now, you take care of it. Get your water out in the bathtub, get your clothes together and get your food together, and get your blinds down." I said, "I'm sure the governor [Joseph Poindexter] is going to call me pretty soon, and I'll have to go down." And sure enough, five minutes later the phone rang and there was the governor.

The governor said, "Ernie, you must come down. Get as many of your staff as you can together." He said, "We're being attacked by Japan."

So I rushed down. Of course, Rhoda Lewis was there when I arrived. Ed Doty, in charge of—head of the civil defense, was there getting his organization together. And I had, I got hold of some of my main secretaries and had them call the lawyers to get them in, and I got several of them in. And we started batting out some of these proclamations that you have to issue under the civilian defense law. Well, about, see, about 8:30 or 9:00, I just don't know when, the phone rang.
The governor said, "Ernie, you come over pretty soon because I got a call from General [Walter] Short [commanding general of the Hawaiian Department]. He wants to see me." So I waited for a while. Sure enough, the phone rang. Short came in. And—oh, wait, Short came in first to the governor's office, then I was called by the Governor to come in. He said, "General Short has arrived with his staff." So I went across the way. You know the attorney general's office is on the second floor of the 'Iolani Palace, on the Waikīkī side. The governor's [office is] on the second floor on the 'Ewa side. So I slipped across the way, went to the office and met these gentlemen. General Short was there. Major [James A.] Mollison was there. As I remember, he's the closest aide. Colonel [Thomas] Green was there, who finally became the military governor representing the general, and several other high-ranking officers. And they were perspiring and then, they were, if you could see them, they were just flushed with excitement.

General Short said, "Well, Governor," he said, "we have been attacked by Japan. Well, our losses are terrible. Pearl Harbor has been racked by bombs. A lot of ships are down. I don't know how many men have been killed but quite a few have been killed." And, he said, "We don't know what the situation is like; it's quite serious." And he says, "If the Japanese come back tonight," he said, "they'll take Hawai‘i and we can't stop them. We have nothing to defend with." So he says, "I've got to have martial law because I don't know whether the Japanese here are loyal or not. I need some control." Not only that but he said, "I've got to control the whole of Honolulu to be sure that we are protected against any possible second attack."

So, the Governor said, "Well, I've got to call the president." So he lifted up the phone, got a connection to the White House. But they couldn't locate President [Franklin D.] Roosevelt. So, the Governor said, "Well, get me Harold Ickes." You remember Harold Ickes was secretary of interior and he, the secretary of interior, was in charge of the territories. Part of his jurisdiction. Well, he got Ickes. Well, he carried on a conversation. I don't know what was being said on the other side, but, the Governor recounted what Short had told him. They discussed it back and forth and finally he hung up. He said, "Okay, [general]." He says, "You can have your martial law."

So the governor got off his desk and walked over to the corner of his office. Have you been up to his office, Dan?

DT: Mmhmm.

EK: Huge office. Well, in the corner there, on the right-hand side, on the Waikīkī side, was a big safe. He opened the safe and pulled out this document. There's already a prepared document for martial law. And he handed it to me. He said, "Ernie, put it in a form for me to sign and check it over." Well, apparently, it had been checked over by somebody because it was all perfectly laid out, but the typewriter was not a type of the type in our office. I thought for a while that maybe Joseph Hodgson had been working on it with the governor because for about two or three or four weeks before December 7, I noticed that Mr. Hodgson would be spending a lot of time with the governor, you know. You can always tell [when they're] in the office because when he leaves, he says, "Ernie, I'm leaving. You take charge, see." So, Rhoda Lewis and I hurried back to our office and we pored over the Organic Act, checked it out, checked out [that] the proclamation was in proper form. So we had it typed out in the form of a proclamation by the governor of Hawai‘i and took it over to the governor and left.
And I presume at that point the governor signed it and called Ickes, perhaps, to confirm it and gave it to the radio and the newspapers.

DT: Have you ever pondered the source of that? Do you think it was drawn up in Washington, D.C. and sent out . . .

EK: I have no idea where it was drawn up. Probably drawn up here. I don’t know.

DT: But you don’t know who would have drawn it up, whether the attorney general?

EK: No, the governor didn’t tell me. I didn’t think it was my business to find out, so I just . . . Rhoda Lewis is still alive. She’s the only one left in my whole staff.

DT: Did either of you speculate on where it had come [from] when you . . .

EK: Well, we speculated like I’m speculating now. I don’t know what Rhoda thought. When I talked to her—she’s still alive but she’s ill. She is ill.

DT: Were you aware at that time that there had been established by the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] and the military, a morale committee and other groups that were already thinking about how Hawai‘i would be involved in the war?

EK: Oh, yes. Of course, the legislature [had] been pondering that, too, and that’s why I think they passed the civil defense act, [the M-Day Act], to set up a structure here within the territorial government to run and take care of all the details of living here—like gas, like water, like food. Meeting at churches and assemblies and movie picture theaters would be closed. All these little details, traffic, so forth, you see, had to be taken care of. So, under martial law, the military government took care of all of, I presume, the military protection of Hawai‘i. We, on the civil defense, took care of the daily operations and living of people here, particularly food, travel, gasoline for cars, what to do with the women and the children, you see. A lot of the wives were given the opportunity to go away to the Mainland, especially where they were wives of people who came from the Mainland to live here in Hawai‘i and work here.

DT: Well, shortly after Pearl Harbor day, you became secretary of Hawai‘i, didn’t you, and later on . . .

EK: Well, I’ll tell you what happened.

DT: . . . you went to attorney general.

EK: Before World War II, I had always wanted to get back into law. And there was an opening on the circuit bench [in 1942]. Carrick Buck over on Kaua‘i was retiring [actually she did not retire from the Kaua‘i circuit bench, she was assigned to the first circuit court in Honolulu in 1942], so I asked the governor [Poindexter], “I would like to apply for that position.” So I did and it was granted to me, before World War II. I was to be a judge on Kaua‘i, see. But, you know, in Washington, they didn’t know, I presumed, the clerk there, the mailing clerk, didn’t know where Hawai‘i was. It was sent out there to the Philippine Islands. (DT chuckles.) My commission was. Yes. And it didn’t arrive here until after December 7, so
when it arrived here, well, I could have gone to Kaua‘i, but the courts had been closed under martial law, you see, so it had been an empty appointment. And that’s when [Governor] Stainback says, “Look you—” well, let me stop here. So when that happened, when I realized there was no point in that, I decided to enter the army. I felt it was my point to do something in the army. So, I did apply in the army. I was offered the commission of major in the judge advocate’s department to use my legal background. Well, the governor, of course, in the meantime, Governor [Ingram] Stainback was appointed governor [in July 1942]. Poindexter was not reappointed. Well, when Stainback heard I was leaving, he said, “You’re not going.” He said, “I need somebody to help me run this government.” He said, “You’ve been in the treasurer’s office, you’ve been in the auditor’s office, you’ve been in the attorney general’s office.” He said, “You’ve got all the background I need.” He said he’s just been, he was just a federal judge. He said, “I don’t know a thing about it.”

So I said, “You’d better square it away with Roosevelt, because I have this commission to be a judge.” So, he had to wire [President] Roosevelt several [times], because they thought over there I was reneging on the [appointment], you see, not realizing what the situation was like here. So finally, Roosevelt approved and then appointed me secretary of Hawai‘i [in September of 1942].

DT: That was after you became attorney general in ’42.

EK: Yes. I became secretary of Hawai‘i [1942–44], which today, of course, under the constitution, is lieutenant governor.

DT: And what time of the year did you switch between attorney general and the secretary of Hawai‘i?

EK: It was in the summer, I think, of . . .

DT: Summertime.

EK: Yeah. And, so, during my term as secretary of Hawai‘i, I served as acting governor of Hawai‘i many times because Poindexter was going back and forth to Washington on many occasions with [attorney general J.] Garner Anthony trying to get martial law revoked. Of course in the meantime, the tension here is awful, you know, with the military.

CC: When you were in the territorial government in the war years, there were a number of other people that were also involved in the territory who all later would become important in Hawai‘i politics. I believe Jack Hall [regional director of the ILWU] was serving in—did you know . . .

EK: I knew Jack very well.

CC: . . . Jack those days?

EK: When I was attorney general, why, he was with the labor department. [Jack Hall worked as an inspector for the wage and hour division.] And, of course, [when] I was an assistant attorney general, one of [my] assignments was to take legal problems in the labor department. I got to know Jack very well. We were good friends. Yes, Jack, and [Robert] McElrath. I
knew [Henry] Epstein [of the United Public Workers] you name them, all of the labor leaders, you see.

CC: What was your feeling about the situation of labor in those days? I know the war put an end to . . .

EK: That's right.

CC: . . . a lot of the labor organizing. Or the organizing had to go more underground. But what were your feelings about what they were trying to do?

EK: Well, my feeling was that eventually they had a place in our community. Of course, I didn't approve at that time of [Harry] Bridge's tactics, you know, but I presume that's what you do when you're starting a new venture into a new community. And, that was one of the reasons why when I was made this offer by [John] Burns when he was delegate to Congress, and when [President] Truman was about to appoint me as governor, I turned Burns down because he was then closely associated with Bridges and [the] ILWU, and they were not in favor at that time here, you see. They were . . . So I turned it down because one of the conditions that Burns had put on his guaranteeing me [appointment as] governor was that he wanted to appoint my whole cabinet, see. He said, "I want veto right over all your appointments."

DT: We're jumping ahead into the [19]50s. We were jumping ahead into 1951.

EK: No, I was answering the question about the position of labor.

CC: Well, I just wanted to get to the fact that you and Jack Hall did have a relationship back in the war years.

EK: Right.

CC: And you knew each other fairly well.

EK: Right.

CC: That was basically what I was trying to do.

EK: That's why later on I went to see him about running for public office, you see.

DT: Yeah, we'll get into the governorship in a few moments, but . . .

EK: We're jumping ahead. I'm telling you about my association with Jack Hall . . .

CC: Right, we got to change tapes.

DT: Tape, that's right.

(Taping stops, then resumes)

JC: The following is videotape number three of the Ernest Kai interview.
DT: All righty, I think you mentioned Jack Hall and [Robert] McElrath as a case in point of being tied in with the government at that time. Actually working for the government, right?

EK: Jack was.

DT: Jack was.

EK: I don't know if McElrath was.

DT: You don't know whether McElrath was.

EK: That must have been later. Yes.

DT: But did you ever have a feeling that they were members of the Communist party? Any indication of that?

EK: Of course, the papers indicated so, and I thought maybe if the papers said so, it might be true.

DT: Well, this was back in the [19]40s now?

EK: Yes.


EK: Mm hmm. And that's when I think Jack was tried under the Smith Act, wasn't it?

DT: Well, that was later in the [19]40s. But in the early [19]40s when he was working for government, you had no idea?

EK: Oh, no, of course not. I just thought he was a young man interested in labor law.

DT: But you recognized him [as] sort of as a coming person in the labor movement.

DT: Yes, yes, that he had some goal and he was learning everything about labor law. 'Cause when he'd come up to me about an opinion, he was very intelligent about discussing the opinion, you see. Very intelligent.

CC: Was Jack Burns also employed in government those days? In [the] early war years, was he . . .

EK: Well, let's see.

CC: Was he still in the police force or . . .

EK: I had no contact with Burns during that time. He came to light later on when he ran for delegateship and made it, you see.

DT: He ran for the delegateship in either '46 or '48 [in 1948].
EK: Yeah, . . .

DT: It slipped me for the moment . . .

EK: After the war.

DT: And lost badly [to Joseph Farrington].

EK: Yeah.

DT: Lost badly.

EK: Yeah, he did. But he was gaining strength with all the 442nd [Regimental Combat Team veterans] when they came back . . .

DT: In the [19]50s, when they returned.

EK: . . . and they started in their group. And the 100th Infantry [Battalion], whatever it is, also backed him up. And that was a big nucleus for him to start in active politics.

DT: Well, you stayed at secretary of Hawai‘i from '42 to '44.

EK: Till the end.

DT: Till the end of the war?

EK: Almost the war's end. Then I told the governor, I said, “May I resign? I want to get back into private practice.”

At that point, [Stainback] said, “You know, Ernie, there's going to be a vacancy on the supreme court bench.” He says, “Why don't you take that appointment?” He said, “I'll recommend you there for that appointment. You serve there until I'm ready to retire. And when I retire, you resign, and I'll fill that vacancy,” (DT chuckles) you see. (Chuckles) Well, at that time they weren't paying the supreme court justices very much and I had a family to raise. And all this time, mind you, the salary there in government wasn't much. As attorney general I only got $1,000 a month that I remember. And the secretary of Hawai‘i only got $1,500 a month, you see. And I figured at that point the supreme court justices were only getting about $1,500 a month.

DT: And you can make a lot more in private practice, of course?

EK: Oh, of course. When I went down the first year, I made about four or five times more than that, you see. And I told the governor, “Frankly,” I said, “you know, I've spent ten years now in my young active life in government service, from working with McGonagle until up here till now.” I said, “I really want to get back into private practice.” So, I think he was terribly disappointed, but he said, “Okay.” So I went back to Judge [William H.] Heen. He had offered me a partnership, you see, so I went down with him.

DT: So it became the law firm of Heen and Kai?

DT: Later on in the [19]50s, mm hmm.

EK: Then [Albert] Evensen came in. It was Heen, Kai, Dodge and Evensen. And then another Chinese lawyer came in. It was [Leslie W. S.] Lum. Heen, Kai, Dodge, Evensen and Lum, you see. Well, we grew, we were doing a lot of work. Of course, I was bringing in all of the, practically all of the business. And of course Judge Heen was still in politics.

DT: Now he was in the territorial senate, was he not?

EK: Right [1926–57] and became president of the senate [in 1955], which was unusual. It was a Republican senate and he was a Democrat. But he was the only capable lawyer there to run it, you see. Run the judiciary committee.

DT: So you sort of retired from politics then?

EK: Yeah . . .

DT: From '45 to at least 1950, at any rate.

EK: Yeah, until I decided to get back into politics when Judge Heen retired from politics, when he got licked running for the U.S. Senate, I think, who beat him. I forget. [Frank] Fasi?

DT: Who beat who?

EK: Senator Heen.

DT: I don't think he was defeated, was he?

EK: Well, yes, he was [in 1959].

DT: Was he defeated?

EK: Yeah, that's when he told me . . .

DT: I don't recall who defeated him offhand. I heard he retired . . .

EK: Well, then he retired. But you see my memory is very, very hazy on that . . .

DT: No, I'm uncertain about that, too. At any rate, that's neither here nor there.

EK: The point was that I could not go into active politics while Judge Heen was in active politics. I had to run a firm that was growing, we were doing very well. So, when he retired, I decided to go into politics. Of course, in the meantime, I kept in touch with the party, and I belonged to the precinct club here and attended all the meetings. I just wanted to build my background [for] when I was ready to get into politics.

DT: So you didn't participate in the Democratic party activity in the late [19]40s?
EK: No. The only thing I did was the precinct work and that’s about all at that point. [actually, EK announced for state senate in 1959.] until I ran for the lieutenant governorship [in 1962], you know, when I spoke to . . .

DT: Way later, yeah.

EK: Later. Then I quit.

DT: But you were aware of the big split in the Democratic party, I think in 1948, were you not?

EK: Oh, yes, of course, yes.

DT: Where did you stand on that? What do you recall . . .

EK: I took no part in it. At that point, I was just, as I said before, my contact was just casual because I was running a law firm that was growing. And when you run a law firm that’s growing with one, two, three, four, five partners and about two or three juniors, why, it’s a big responsibility, you see.

DT: So you didn’t get forced to take sides with the stand-patters . . .

EK: No . . .

DT: . . . or the walkout group or . . .

EK: Exactly, and I wasn’t called upon to take sides because I wasn’t influential in party politics at that time, you see.

DT: But your contacts were probably a little bit better with the so-called conservative faction?

EK: Yes, always with Judge Heen’s side. He’s very conservative.

DT: So you would, if you’d been there, you’d probably joined the—walked out.

EK: Yeah, probably would have. I know I would have walked out, yes. And that’s why I stayed away because I didn’t want to cause any friction at that point, ’cause in my mind, I felt later on I wanted to get into politics. Then I’d get actively associated with the boys, you see.

DT: In other words, you didn’t really approve of the ILWU taking over the Democratic party.

EK: Not at that point, no.

DT: Or at any point, I guess.

EK: Well, later on, when Jack became very well respected, of course, I felt that he was a good leader.

DT: Oh, Jack Hall, you’re referring to or Jack Burns?
EK: No, Jack [Hall] and I were good friends and I respected him. And later on, as you well know, he was respected by business.

DT: Yeah, times changed.


DT: But you did toy with reentering [the] political field . . .

EK: Yes.

DT: . . . at least in 1951, wasn’t it?

EK: Yes.

DT: About the time or at least---then somebody must have checked with you as to whether you would be in the running for territorial governor.

EK: Well, yes. But prior to that, I had a little flurry. I decided to try and run for the senate. And, at that time, as a Democrat. And I’m just beginning to get into the group that was running [for] office, the younger guys, you know, like Herman Lum, Masato Doi, and, well, I can’t remember the names now, but, I ran with Kahanamoku, what was the first name?

DT: Oh, Anna Kahanamoku?

EK: Anna Kahanamoku.

DT: You ran in, that was 1954, though, wasn’t it?


DT: Yes, but we’re talking about the early 1950s now.

EK: No, I’m talking before that.

DT: In ’48? Or ’48 or ’49?

EK: Yeah, I forgot that year. I think it was ’48 or ’47. No, no.

DT: I think you’re in the wrong decade.

EK: Yeah, I think I am in the wrong decade. I think I better . . . Because I know I ran for the senate before I ran for lieutenant governor. And I got defeated in that so I decided to shoot for lieutenant governorship and started to build up my background, my contact with the party, you see.

DT: Wasn’t it the statehood election where you decided to run?
EK: Yeah, I think so.

DT: In 1959, you see.

EK: Well, when was it, let's see, yeah 1959, of course, yes. It must be then because after then I ran for lieutenant governor . . .

DT: Lieutenant governor in '62.

EK: Yeah.

DT: Yeah, well let's go back to 1951 now because this made headlines at one time and that is that it appeared in many people's mind that you were about to become the appointed territorial governor of Hawai'i.

EK: Correct.

DT: Back at the time of Oren Long.

EK: That's right.

DT: Before he was appointed.

EK: Before Oren Long.

DT: Before he was appointed. Judge [Ingram] Stainback was leaving the post, right?

EK: Yes.

DT: And you thought you might become territorial governor. What happened there?

EK: Well, I don't know what happened except that I had a very good chance. I had recommendations all over the place for me as governor. And, even just before, well, just before I got this call from Chuck Mau and Mits [Mitsuyuki] Kido, Mr. [Walter] Dillingham, who apparently had a lot of contacts in Washington came to see me.

He said, "Well, Ernie," he said, "I believe you'll be the next governor of Hawai'i."

I said, "Well, thank you." I didn't ask him where he got his information, but I know he was very close to Washington. Well, then after that, that's when Kido and Chuck Mau came to see me and made me the proposition that [John] Burns would guarantee me the governorship if I would let him have the power to appoint my whole cabinet and the right to veto any appointments that I might make, see. Well, . . .

DT: Where did Burns get this authority? He didn't have any . . .

EK: Who?

DT: Where did Burns get the authority to be talking this way and doing these things?
EK: He had the appointment. He had bribed the secretary of Truman to pull my commission off the desk.

DT: You learned about that much later, didn't they?

EK: I learned about that, but I didn't realize he did [it] at that time.

DT: You didn't realize it at the time, yeah. We're now back in 1951 and we're talking about Burns' probable role in blocking your nomination to be territorial governor. Burns, apparently, before he died said that he had done this by giving presents to the secretary of Harry Truman. You knew nothing about that.

EK: Nope.

DT: What authority would Burns have had at that time to be delving in this high-level politics? I mean, Chuck Mau was a well-recognized name. Ernie Kai was a well-recognized name. But Jack Burns was sort of a unemployed policeman.

EK: Jack Burns that time was delegate to Congress.

DT: No, he was not delegate to Congress until 1956.

EK: Well, somehow or another, he was in Washington and . . .

DT: Well, that's what I'm trying to . . .

EK: I don't know. I don't know how, but he apparently had access to Truman's desk as he admitted. But I don't know what power he had. He bribed the secretary.

CC: But you remember Chuck Mau and Mits Kido speaking to you?

EK: Oh, yes, they came to me in my office where I'm practicing law and they made an appointment. Both of them came to see me. And [Mau or Kido] said, "Ernie," he said, "We just got word from Burns that he's guaranteed to get Truman to appoint you governor if you'll do such and such." And such and such being appoint my whole cabinet and have a right to veto anyone that I might appoint otherwise. And I talked it over with [William] Heen. He and my wife [Margaret] decided we didn't want to because at that point, Burns was closely associated with the ILWU, and they were not in, you know, in good---they weren't well regarded here. And I didn't want to have that move into my regime as governor.

DT: But didn't you have better contacts with the Truman administration than everybody else probably at the time?

EK: Yes, I did.

DT: Better contacts than with . . .

EK: But at that point, of course, I didn't have any direct contact with Truman. But I had friends who worked for me and got me the nomination. But, lo and behold, this happened. And right
away I heard, I was told that Burns immediately went to Oren E. Long and got a Tennessee senator—where Long came from, from Tennessee—to back him up. Of course Truman knew nothing about my appointment because it’d been pulled away. And [Burns] got Oren E. Long in.

DT: Then you accept the story as being true, or do you think it’s plausible? How would you label it, this Burns account of how he did this? Do you believe it?

EK: Well . . .

DT: Or do you have reason to disbelieve it, or are you still puzzled by it . . .

EK: Well, I believe it because he confessed it on his tape [in the Burns Oral History Project]. Why would he do that on his dying bed, so to speak?

DT: Well, there could be, if one wants to speculate there, you could speculate that maybe he didn’t have that much influence and in retrospect, you tried to point out how influential he had been.

EK: No, I believe him because first, Walter Dillingham told me so. Number two, I believe the article because Burns admits it, see.

CC: Okay, let’s move on.

DT: Yes.

CC: I think we need to—you were surprised then when Long was appointed?

EK: Yes, of course, I was surprised. But I thought, well, that’s the way the ball bounces, you know.

CC: How did you find out?

EK: Well, the newspapers came out with it. That’s how.

CC: So you didn’t know that you had not gotten the appointment until you read it in the paper?

EK: I didn’t know about my being possible governor until it came out in 1976, when Burns admitted that he cheated me out of it.

CC: But you had a—as long as we’re talking about Burns, you had another run-in with Jack Burns a little bit later, in 1962, right?

EK: That’s right, when I decided to run for [the] lieutenant governorship. Because I still at that point wanted to be governor of Hawai‘i and I thought I had a chance. So, if you want that story, I’ll tell you about it. When [William] Richardson announced that he was going to run for lieutenant governor, I thought, well, that’s going to be kind of tough. But I think the only way for me to have half of a chance is to go and see the people who [were] backing him up. So I asked Burns if he’d have lunch with me at the Evergreen, that’s where the politicians
used to meet for lunch, you know. So I had lunch with him. And I told him, "Frankly." I said, "Burns, I want to run for the [lieutenant?] governorship." Of course, at that point he must have known about this Truman deal. He said nothing about it to me and I said, "I know you're very close to Bill Richardson but this being, I being a Democrat running [against] a Democrat, could you just hands off, lay your hands off on my running again and give me a chance?"

He said, "Sure, don't worry. This is a free world. If you want to run, you run."

All right, fine. Then I knew that Jack Hall was very close to Burns and had the control of [the] ILWU. And I knew Jack very well, so I had lunch with Jack. And Jack said, "Well, never mind, come down to my office. We'll have a sandwich in my office." So I went down there, and I told him what I was going to do.

He said, "Ernie, I'm for you." But he said, "Under one condition." "I can't help it if Burns comes to ask me to back up anybody else," he said, I've got to do it. I've got my orders from ILWU convention in Seattle. The last convention they had, they ordered me that if Burns needs any help politically, you help him, see." But he says, "Okay, you go ahead. Run."

Well, apparently, the polls showed a week before the election day that I was running way ahead of Richardson. Well, I suppose I find this out later when Jack Hall came to see me after the election. He said, "Ernie, I've got to confess to you what happened, why you lost." He said, "Burns called me up about four days before the election day and said, 'You've got to help Richardson. The polls show Ernie Kai leading.'" He says, "I have no alternative. I sent the word out right away all over the islands: back Richardson against Kai." Hilo was my hometown, I had a stronghold there. Kaua'i was another place where I had relatives. It was going very well. The only place that was weak was on Maui, see. Well, what happened? Of course, the ILWU is stronger on the Big Island, on Kaua'i. Boom. I lost.

DT: That certainly didn't make you very happy, I guess.

EK: Of course not. I was very unhappy. Then that's when I said I quit politics. I don't like it.

DT: All righty, we've got to change tapes and continue.

(Taping stops, then resumes)

JC: The following is videotape number four of the Ernest Kai interview and it's also the last tape of the interview.

CC: Maybe you can just tell us a story. When you would play golf, Jack Burns would . . .

EK: No, no, I never played golf with Jack.

DT: But, Jack would see you.

EK: Jack would see me passing—at the golf club or on the streets, or when I go up to him on business—and say, "Good morning, Governor." I thought it's just because I was acting governor. But maybe it was because he knew that he—you know, that I would have been
governor. I don’t know.

CC: Well, let’s go back to, you just told the story about your loss to Richardson, and Jack Hall telling you about that. One thing, did you feel Jack Hall had been honest with you and straightforward with you?

EK: Absolutely. I trusted him, I liked him. We were good friends. And he was very candid with me as he told me ahead of time, he said, “Ernie, I’ll back you up, but I’m going to have to lay hands off, do nothing. You run without any problems for me, anyway, unless Burns asks me.”

CC: Hall did have a reputation for, if he told you something you could count on it.

EK: Absolutely. In business, absolutely. He was known for his honesty and trustworthiness.

DT: Did you feel the same way about Burns or not?

EK: Who me?

DT: Yes.

EK: No. How could I trust him after what he did.

DT: No, I felt I had to ask. (Chuckles)

EK: Yeah, twice.

CC: Let’s go back a little bit because from your background, you said your early family were interested in actually the royalty, and were very much opposed to the overthrow of the monarchy. And you come up to join the Democratic party and actually serving as the acting governor of the territory and lieutenant governor for the territory, and then statehood comes along. How did you feel about statehood? Did you feel statehood was important or did you think that maybe . . .

EK: No, I didn’t feel statehood was important to Hawai‘i and I’ll tell you why. While I was secretary of Hawai‘i, lieutenant governor, the Hawaiians came to see me—the old-timers, I don’t mean the young Hawaiians. The old-timers, older than I, who knew my family and my background. And they said, “Mr. Kai,” he said, “you have an excellent background. Your heritage is good. You come from ali‘i family. You hold a high office here. We want you to lead us in a move against statehood.” I thought it over and I said, “You know, Dan,” I knew Dan. He was the leader then, Dan Kalani [COH unable to confirm name] was his name. And I said, “Dan, I can’t do it right now. Took an oath of office as secretary of Hawai‘i to back up the constitution, so forth, see.” I said, “You find somebody else, but any other help I can do for you, why, you let me know. Money or otherwise, you know.” Well, of course, they got nowhere. They couldn’t find anybody to lead them. But they didn’t want statehood.

DT: Now how large a group was this?

EK: I don’t know. About fifteen or twenty of the Hawaiians came [to see] with me. All old-timers.
They came, fifteen or twenty of them came to you.

Yeah, this [is] a small group. Maybe a committee.

But it still represented the older people in the community.

Right, yes. The older Hawaiians, maybe most of the Hawaiians, I don't know. But that's a very interesting bit of history.

But you weren't inclined to get involved?

No, not at that point. I was very happy where I was and I didn't want to cause any problems.

If circumstances had been different do you think you might have been tempted?

I might have, I might have.

Oh, really?

I might have.

Later on, when statehood was about to happen, well, you said there was a good story about that. Was that the same story?

That was it.

How did you feel, then, when statehood occurred?

Well, of course, there was nothing to do about it. I felt that this was maybe a good time that maybe it will spell prosperity, will spell growth, because I know at that time we were considered as a second-rate area. No credibility as far as financing and mortgaging is concerned. I know that the big banks on the Mainland would not mortgage property here because they were afraid that on a foreclosure, what have you, they would not be recognized in the courts, not realizing that as a territory we were just as good—legally, in the courts anyway—as any state, the forty-eight states, you see. But we really got credibility and money kept pouring in at that point, which was good. I thought, well, this was fine. We'll have money now to do improvements and so forth. We're electing our own governor. That's another big plus. 'Cause under the form of government that the old-time Hawaiians wanted, they wanted a form like England. You know, where you recognized your ali'i, but they don't have any say, you know, influence in government. But then you recognized them as they do in England. You recognize the royalty there; they do have a royalty group here.

They were interested in the pageantry rather than . . .

Right.

. . . the actual government.

The Hawaiians love that pageantry, you know.
DT: They love the pageantry.

EK: But in the meantime you have a Democratic form of government like the parliament, see.

DT: Oh, I see. So they weren't interested . . .

EK: I thought that was a good idea.

DT: I see.

EK: See, but nobody to lead them. It'd been a nice compromise, I think, and accomplish the same thing.

DT: I see, yeah. But nevertheless, you've decided to run for office, I guess, for the senate in '59 right after statehood.

EK: I guess I did. Yeah, I guess I did. That's what time I forget. But I thought, well, if I can't [lead in] the governorship, I'll run for the senate. But at that point, well, for the senate, after that or before that.

DT: I don't know whether it was '59 or---it must have been '59 because you ran for lieutenant governor in '64 ['62] . . .

EK: I can't remember the sequence. Whether I ran before I ran for the lieutenant governorship or after. But I did take a crack at running for the senate. I think it was before.

DT: That's the state senate.

EK: Right. I ran with [Spark] Matsunaga and Anna Kahanamoku, and [O. Vincent] Esposito. And I couldn't make it. So that's when I figured I quit. I quit. Well, anyway, I think that was before I ran for lieutenant governorship.

DT: I think so, too. Fifty-nine or '60.

EK: Because after [the] lieutenant governorship, I quit it completely.

DT: You felt bitter after the lieutenant governor's race.

EK: Oh, yeah. Because I felt that they didn't want me, they didn't want me. Well, okay, I'll step out.

DT: So you really walked away, tried to walk away from it.

EK: I walked away from it. Walked away from any connection thereafter with the Democratic party. 'Cause they asked me if I'd serve on the finance committee to raise funds for the Democratic party. I said, "No."

DT: Wouldn't even help them raise money afterwards?
EK: No, sir. Clarence Ching, you know, was very close to the governor [Burns]. He was the one who got all of that, with K. J. Luke, you know, all that area down by the airport?

DT: Mm hmm.

EK: Well, Clarence was very well-to-do. Asked me if I’d serve on this special committee to raise money for the party. I said, “No.” Finished.

DT: Well, actually, probably you felt this way because the party, in essence, had sort of become Burns’ own vehicle.

EK: Exactly.

DT: And I guess that’s why you would walk away from it. Is that right?

EK: Right, right. If it had been otherwise, I probably would have stayed. But Burns was running, as you well know, and he ran it, and even after his death, his hands reached out to the party through [Governor George] Ariyoshi and others. ‘Cause the employees that he had stayed under Ariyoshi.

DT: How would you sum up Jack Burns? His whole total career?

EK: Well, [an] opportunist who hit the scene at the right time with the right backing. The backing was really remarkable. It was the 442nd, and they were just absolutely loyal to him. Hundred percent. Because I know that, oh, my gosh. The loyalty [of] the 442nd, you know—well, when I was acting governor, [when] Stainback was away, they about to depart, so I had to give them a farewell speech from the second floor of the ‘Iolani Palace and, oh, what a sight. It was a beautiful sight. Young boys going away and, of course, you know what happened. But when [they] came back, of course, they were all for Burns, and their families and their friends. So you see, Burns had a remarkable, remarkable background of help. Four forty-second, 100th Battalion. And I think he had help at Pearl Harbor. The way you get into politics, is to get big groups to back you up. You can’t get individuals to help you.

DT: It built slowly but it built surely, I think one could say. Well, what did you think of Burns when he really strengthened the base of the Democratic party insofar as it existed by making peace with the people Downtown? Merchant Street people.

EK: Well, he made a remarkable job there.

DT: He tied it in with labor.

EK: He brought respect to the party and how he did it, I don’t know. But he gained the respect of business leaders, community leaders, and so did Jack Hall. And I must take my hat off to him. He did a beautiful job of giving respect to the Democratic party.

DT: As a political move, it was . . .

EK: Right.
DT: ... great, you say.

EK: Right, right. I'm glad he moved away from the taint of communism and so forth and just became Burns, the man who was going to bring prosperity to Hawai'i—which he did, with statehood, of course, you know.

DT: Would you say, quite apart from politics of being the adroit move, would you say it was something which was good for Hawai'i in the long run or not good for Hawai'i?

EK: It's hard to say. It was good for Hawai'i up to a certain point. Of course now it's gotten out of control. Burns is no longer there, you see. Whether this would all happen today, the so-called controversial Japanese investments, I don't know. Maybe so. But up to the point when Burns passed away, he was doing a good job.

DT: Now Hawai'i . . .

EK: And I think at that point, let me put this in, I think anybody with a reasonable amount of intelligence, though, could have done the same good job, see. Because you take [Ronald] Reagan, for example. He isn't doing a good job because he is not surrounding himself with the right people. But Burns surrounded himself with the right people. Now, you can't expect an individual to run a government like this. You have to have people who are qualified and trustworthy to run their different departments, you see. I know that because I served as one of those department heads under two governors, you see.

DT: Well, now the Democrats are in as much control as the Republicans used to be.

EK: Exactly.

DT: For fifty years it was all Republicans. Now, it looks like it's going to be fifty years, all Democrats.

EK: Correct.

DT: Particularly as a result of the Burns adroit political move.

EK: Exactly.

DT: Do you have any reflections on that? Do you think that's good in the long run . . .

EK: I don't think it's good.

DT: . . . to have that type of situation?

EK: I feel sorry for the people of Hawai'i because we should have a two-party system and not a one-party system. It's almost a one-party system here. And I take my hat off to [Frank] Fasi, although he's a renegade, considered renegade by the Democrats. But, I think he's trying to pull—in addition to running the city—pull the Republican party together. It needs pulling together. And the community leaders don't get back to the Republican party with money and help and so forth. And I don't blame them because businesses will go along with the party
that runs the government. Because business has to survive under that party and that
government, see, as they run it.

DT: Any other further thoughts about Fasi? I was going to ask you about him.

EK: What about Fasi? I think he’s doing a good job, personally. He might be a little abrasive and
so forth but he is outspoken and he speaks well. And I think he is genuinely interested in
building this community up to the upright community. I really do.

DT: Convinced of that after all the years.

EK: Yeah. Well, why would he spend money and time to run for office except that you want to do
something about it. After all, he’s had a long career.

DT: Oh, yes, that’s for sure.

EK: Long career.

DT: It goes back to [19]50s.

EK: Yeah, right.

DT: Should we ask about [George] Ariyoshi, Chris?

CC: Well, yeah, you want to ask about what you think about Mr. . . .

DT: Any reaction?

EK: I have no opinion of Ariyoshi. I never admired him very much. He carried on what Burns has
started, and very easily so. And the thing that happened with [the U.S.] Customs [Inspectors]
I think was very stupid. You know, being caught there [with undeclared items]. And, . . .

CC: What about our present governor? What do you think of Mr. [John] Waihee?

EK: Oh, I think he’s doing a good job. Good job.

CC: So he might be around for a while?

EK: I think he’ll be around for a long while. I think if he runs next time he can make it. There’s
nobody in the Republican party that can beat him at this point. Really. They’ve got to get
going sooner to beat Waihee. I think Waihee will be there as long as he wants to be there.

DT: He seems to have been pretty strong on the public relations side.

EK: The public relations [is] good. The media’s been good to him and he’s a trained lawyer. He
makes sense. You can’t go wrong if you surround yourself again with good people, see.
You’ve got to have good people. Reagan did not have good people. My God, every darn one
of them has just been in trouble for fraud or (DT chuckles) been indicted and (tape inaudible),
you see.
DT: Well, sounds like you're still a Democrat of sorts, at any rate. It's hard to . . .

EK: Well, I'm a freelancer.

(Laughter)

EK: I'm an independent. No, I swing back and forth. If there's somebody—I would vote for Fasi, for example, again, because I think he's a good man. Although I'm torn. I know Dennis O'Connor. I know his father very well. Dennis is a good man and he'd probably put up a good fight.

DT: Now, it looks like we're going to have a three- or four-way race there.

EK: Yeah.

DT: I don't think I have anything else. Chris, do you?

CC: No, I think that's ending on that note about Hawai'i politics, I think, an end.

DT: Well, thank you very much.

CC: Well, thank you very much.

EK: Well, you're welcome.

CC: It's been interesting.

JC: And that's the end of Ernest Kai interview and the end of this tape.

END OF INTERVIEW
HAWAIʻI
POLITICAL HISTORY
DOCUMENTATION PROJECT

Volume I

Center for Oral History
Social Science Research Institute
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June 1996