William Shakespeare had a remarkable understanding of the successes and failings of rulers. Though his plays present primarily rulers of royal and aristocratic descent, these figures can be easily replaced with the members of the power elites in modern societies. When on a recent trip to China and Germany someone informed me on December 18 about the death of Senator Daniel Inouye and the extraordinary letter, presumably from his deathbed, suggesting to Governor Neil Abercrombie that he appoint the just re-elected Congresswoman Colleen Hanabusa as his successor, I immediately thought of a grand Shakespearean design. Here we had a plot involving the most powerful politician in recent Hawai’i history attempting to retain his influence beyond his death. The Senator assumed that the Governor would simply be overwhelmed by his dying wish and the emotional expectations of the people and follow his suggestion. He didn’t anticipate that the Governor would respond in kind, namely follow his own reading of the situation. After all, the old master of politics was dead and the Governor was now taking on his role of power.

On the morning of December 17 when the Governor was speaking at a function at Pearl Harbor he became suddenly informed by his staff that he had to immediately return to the Capitol building because of a political emergency. At around 11:30 AM, he encountered in the waiting area of his office two prominent Inouye supporters (Walter Dods and Inouye’s lawyer Watanabe) who, supposedly, had just returned from Washington, D.C. with a letter (marked personal) from the Senator. Since the letter was printed on the personal stationary of the Senator, the Governor assumed that its content was indeed personal. He therefore didn’t share it with the messengers and thanked them for the delivery. Thirty minutes later his staff informed him that the Senator had died around 12:00 PM. When he looked at the date of the letter he found it rather peculiar that it was dated December 17. How was it possible that the two prominent citizens could deliver a personal letter from the Senator to the Governor 30 minutes before his death?
Was the letter written in Washington or Honolulu? Was the letter actually signed by the Senator or was it a signature stamp put on the letter in the Senator’s office in Honolulu? Was the letter part of a grand Shakespearean cabal orchestrated by people in the inner circle of the Senator who were aware that his death would mean that they would all lose their power to the Governor? It would be understandable that they were desperately trying to preserve the political influence they had accumulated over the years.

At 1:00 PM the Governor was present at a scheduled press conference dealing with the budget for the new fiscal year. During that appearance he was asked whether he had received a letter from the Senator and whether he would abide by the request made in the letter. It dawned on him that the letter had been released by the Senator’s staff to the press, either in Washington or Honolulu, and wasn’t any longer a confidential communication from the Senator to him. The letter had become a public document putting pressure on the Governor to actualize the Senator’s political last will. He responded in the press conference by saying that he would abide by the constitutional procedure that was set up a few years ago, ironically with the help of legislator Colleen Hanabusa. The Governor had no choice but to wait for the recommendation by the Central Committee of the Democratic Party and to then follow his own political instinct, namely to assert his authority in transitioning Hawai’i politics into the 21st century.

Senator Inouye’s career symbolized dramatic political change in Hawai’i that began with the radical transformation of the Democratic Party in 1954 by local Japanese WWII-veterans and a few Haole liberals. The change meant the end of the post-annexation era when Haole oligarchs and the offspring of Hawaiian Ali’is were in control of political and economic power in Hawai’i. It culminated in statehood in the year 1959 and the replacement of the Republican Party by the Democratic Party as the unchallenged political force in the Hawaiian Islands. Inouye’s masterful management of politics during his tenure of 58 years in various elective offices began to falter in 2008 when he chaired the presidential campaign of Hillary Clinton in Hawai’i and had to face an overwhelming defeat in the presidential primary by the Obama campaign, chaired by then US-Representative Neil Abercrombie and managed by Brian Schatz who has now become the Senator’s successor. Inouye didn’t comprehend the meaning of this stunning defeat and repeated that capital mistake when he supported in 2010 Mufi Hannemann against Neil
Abercrombie in the democratic primary for Governor. His losing grip on the dynamics of Hawai‘i politics became confirmed in the congressional primary of 2012 when he again supported Hannemann, this time against Tulsi Gabbard, a rising Democratic Party star at 31. Inouye was out of touch with the new era she signifies, because he held stubbornly on to an understanding of politics that had served him well for many decades. His death represents the end of the politics that has governed Hawai‘i since statehood. Neil Abercrombie is the transitional figure who with the appointment of the 40 years old Schatz as Inouye’s successor and the 41 years old Senate President Shan Tsutsui as his new Lt. Governor has already set perimeters for the future. His gubernatorial campaign slogan from 2010, the dawn of a “New Day” in Hawai‘i, has emphatically taken on a new meaning. Yet something else may still result from this generational change in the political class of Hawai‘i.

Hawaii’s mainland image is defined by the tourist destination of Waikiki and the WWII-memorial at Pearl Harbor. The political dynamics of the state remains a terra incognita for mainlanders, including all political pundits. The inane controversy surrounding President Obama’s birth certificate simply confirmed the exotic image of his origins. The President himself has been unwilling to highlight the symbolic meaning of his Hawai‘i background since it would simply have added to the alien aspects of his African father and Indonesian childhood that right-wing opponents used to malign him as being ‘un-American’, though he is recognized around the world as the first cosmopolitan U.S-President. In addition, his Hawai‘i background gets a new meaning by the demographic transformation of the U.S. which will look more and more like multiethnic Hawai‘i. The diverse faces and faiths of the new Congressional delegation from the State represent the future demographic reality of the country as a whole. Abercrombie’s campaign slogan from 2010, which pundits have frequently ridiculed, may actually be seen as recognizing the path breaking role Hawai‘i is performing with the Hawai‘i born President in the White House, its truly representative Congressional delegation and the upstate New York born Governor. The 21st century has arrived.

*Manfred Henningsen has been a Professor of Political Science at the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa since 1970.*