

THOMAS P. GILL / 1922-2009

'Iconic figure' shaped land use, rights laws

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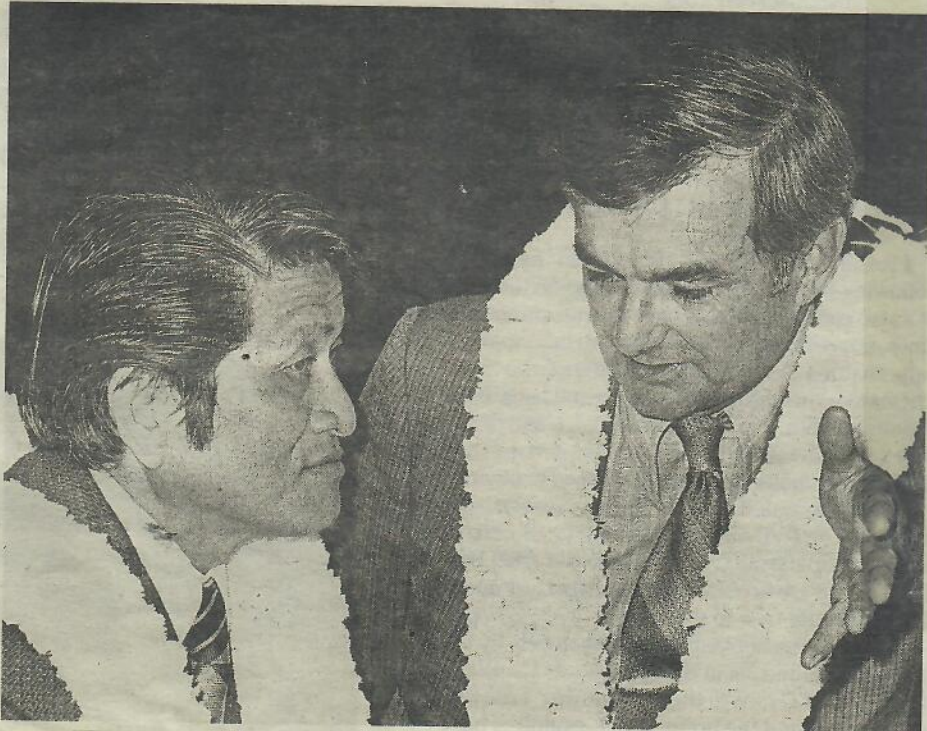
Former Hawaii Lt. Gov. Thomas P. Gill had an impact on society and law in Hawaii and the United States far beyond his few years in elected office.

Gill, 87, who died yesterday, is best remembered for his role in passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. During his only term in the U.S. House of Representatives, he was picked to be floor manager, successfully ushering the measure through committees to a vote.

He wrote Title VI, the section prohibiting discrimination in any enterprise receiving federal funding.

"That has had an impact on everything that happens in the United States," said local civil rights advocate Marsha Joyner.

Gill "played a major role in defining the political culture in Hawaii," U.S. Sen. Daniel Inouye said in a statement.



STAR-BULLETIN FILE PHOTO / 1973

Tom Gill, right, and Nelson K. Doi chatted on December 4, 1973 — the day they made the formal announcement that they would run as a team for governor and lieutenant governor.

Like Inouye and other veterans, the Honolulu-born Gill returned to Hawaii and engineered the post-World War II political revolution that brought the descendants of immigrants into political power formerly held by kamaaina landowners.

"He played a major role in organizing the infrastructure of the Democratic Party in preparation for its historic victory" in the 1954 election, said political writer and filmmaker Tom Coffman.

As a state lawmaker, Gill was an author of land-use legislation — "the law we still live under today, to which we owe the preservation of conservation districts, open space, agricultural lands, relatively compact urban areas," Coffman said.

Gill also was an advocate for the leasehold-conversion law, forcing large estates to sell lots to lessees, which passed in 1967.

Former Democratic Party Chairman Richard Port said Gill "was the progressive voice of the Democratic Party for more than a quarter century."

Gill started as an Oahu

county chairman in 1952 on his return home from college, and continued to be active in the party, although a long political career eluded him.

In addition to single terms as congressman and lieutenant governor, he served two terms in the state House, holding office when Hawaii became a state.

After losing a bid for the U.S. Senate in 1964, he returned to Hawaii and was appointed by Gov. John A. Burns to head the state Office of Economic Opportunity, which implemented anti-poverty laws he had a role in passing.

"He got Hawaii's grant proposals to Washington while other states were still reading the manual," said Coffman. "He displayed a great capacity to make a telling difference in a short period of time through intellectual vigor, deep conviction and very hard work."

In written statements, U.S. Rep. Neil Abercrombie called Gill an "iconic figure ... tough minded, sharp-tongued and dedicated to Hawaii," and Honolulu Mayor Mufi Hannemann said he "was a seminal figure in Hawaii's history."

Another former Democratic lieutenant governor, Jean King, said, "Integrity is the word that immediately comes to mind ... to make the wisest, most caring decision he could on the side of the people, and integrity in the sense that there would be no personal, unethical shenanigans."

Gill was an individualist, drawing criticism in his day as not being a team player. Although not Burns' favored running mate, he was elected lieutenant governor in 1966. The rift between the two men and their supporters affected the party for years.

After unsuccessful bids for governor in 1970 and 1974, he continued in private law practice, specializing in labor practice and employee rights. His son Tony Gill, also a labor attorney, said the headlines today about the legality of imposing furloughs for state employees are affected by his father's work.

"In almost any conceivable litigation scenario, the law that will be applied was, in large part, developed by my father. He either tried cases, assisted in writing briefs or influenced the text

of the law. I often have the honor now to cite the cases he tried."

In the 1990s, he was appointed by former Gov. Ben Cayetano to head the State Commission on Sexual Orientation and the Law, which advocated legalizing same-gender unions.

His last public advocacy was with Save Our Star-Bulletin, a committee of local leaders who launched a successful effort in federal court that stopped Liberty Newspapers, former owner of the newspaper, from shutting it down.

Gill was born in Honolulu, graduated from Roosevelt High School and enlisted in the Army, serving in New Guinea and the Philippines. He earned a law degree at the University of California.

He is survived by Lois, his wife for 61 years; sons Thomas (Tony), Eric, Gary, Ivan and Timothy; daughter Andrea; brother Lorin T. Gill; 12 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

A private family service is planned. The family requests that in lieu of flowers, memorial donations be made to the American Civil Liberties Union.