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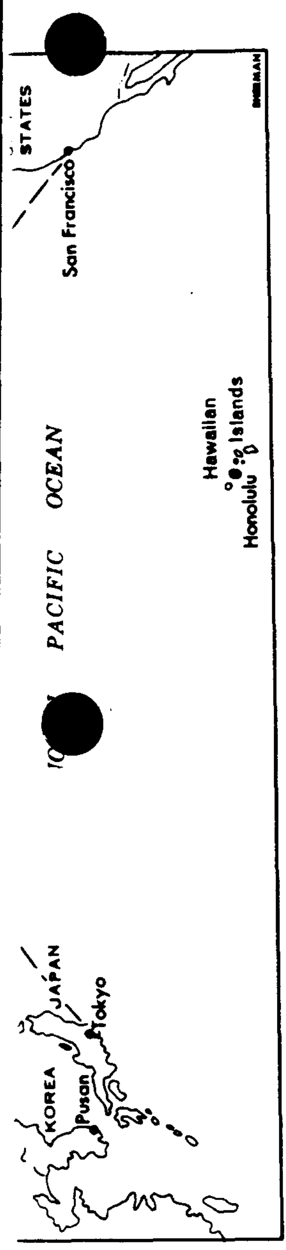

The North Pacific Region including Alaska and the USSR. Photo courtesy of the University of Washington Press.

ARMED FORCES ON A NORTHERN FRONTIER

The Military in Alaska's History, 1867-1987

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Foreword by Peter Karsten

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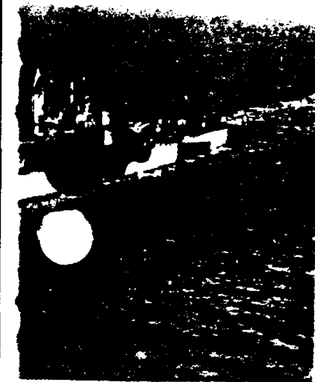

Navy photo, courtesy of the

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GIBRALTAR OF THE NORTH

The Second World War was to Alaska what the First World War had been to the nation. The paramount theme of American participation in the Great War was the historic departure of the United States from its traditional isolationism; a secondary but no less important motif was the mobilization of American society, the marshalling of national resources, the proliferation of government influence in all areas of American life. The essential focus of Alaska's experience during the Second World War was the end of its isolation from the continental United States, the mobilization of all Alaskans in the crusade to evict the Japanese from the Aleutians, and the marshalling of the territory's human and natural resources in the war effort.

THE LEGACY

As a consequence of the war, Alaska's territorial era entered its twilight phase, which was eclipsed by the dawn of statehood nineteen years later. A further legacy was Alaska's predictably significant role in the militarization of the Arctic that emerged in the postwar confrontation between the United States and the U.S.S.R. A consequence of all this was the enhancement of Alaska's strategic importance in national defense.

The physical evidence of the militarization of Alaska was everywhere. Over 300 installations had been built and operated in the territory at a cost approaching $3 billion.(1) Between 1941 and 1945, more than 300,000 troops had served in Alaska with a peak strength of 152,000 in 1943.(2) This great influx of military personnel was reflected by the general population figures, which registered an increase from 72,524 in 1940 to over 128,600 in 1950--a surge of almost 78 percent that was unprecedented in the United States during the war. The major beneficiaries were focal points of military activity like Fairbanks, Anchorage, and Seward, where the population doubled or quadrupled. "In short, the war was the biggest boom Alaska had ever experienced, bigger than any of the gold rushes of the past. Alaskans themselves were forced into an awareness of the outside world."(3)

The economic impact of Alaska's militarization was equally dramatic, with armed services employment accounting for nearly 48 percent of all employment in the territory, compared with a national average of 5 percent. In 1939 only 12 percent of Alaskans were employed by government. Self-employment during the war plummeted

from over a third of all Alaskans to slightly more than a tenth. Nearly one third of Alaskans employed heavily in traditional commodity-producing industries, such as timber, fishing, and mining in 1939, had left this employment sector by 1950.(4)

Department of Defense construction in 1951 provided nearly 15 percent of private sector income compared with a national average half of that percentage.(5) Such statistics for military employment and its economic impact reflect the overall increase of federal participation in Alaska affairs as a direct legacy of the war.(6) No longer could Alaskans, paraphrasing the old Russian aphorism, take comfort that God was in heaven and Washington far away. No longer did Alaskans have only the Department of Interior to castigate for its "colonialism." Indeed, the territory that had allegedly for so long been "neglected" by the United States and economically exploited by outside interests after 1945 increasingly witnessed the intrusion of government into every aspect of northern life and society.

Alaska clearly was a bureaucrat's dream. Nowhere else under the U.S. flag had the federal government such a grip on the lives of American citizens. Whether cutting a tree, building a house, harvesting wild game and fish, or going into business, Alaskans found bureaucrats were on hand to issue regulations.(7) In 1944 the federal government owned 98 percent of the territory and everything in it.

However, it appeared that the dominance by outside interests might well continue and, indeed, might well expand. In 1945 Congress buckled under to Washington and the California salmon interests, refused to relinquish federal control of the Alaska fisheries to territorial jurisdiction, and rejected the territory's attempts to outlaw fish traps. Despite the war's many changes a number of Alaskans continued to rail that Alaska was little more than a "feudal barony" and a "looted land," exploited by absentee mining and fishing interests extracting millions in natural resources and generating few economic or social benefits.(8) Such exploitation, real and sensationalized, prompted the Territorial Legislature in 1945 to "memorialize" Congress that Alaska statehood was the moral equivalent of the Four Freedoms expressed in the Atlantic Charter, which had supported the rights of small minorities and nations to seek self-determination.(9)

A reactionary, sourdough opposition coalesced to block initial proposals for statehood in 1941 and 1943. It grew stronger with renewed attempts by statehood proponents in 1946 to change Alaska's constitutional status.(10) Represented by such groups as the Alaska Pioneers, the Alaska Miners' Association, and regional special interests, the opposition clearly represented a large minority uncomfortable about the war's acceleration of the pace of change. One particularly vocal opponent, the former territorial representative Alaska Linck, portrayed statehood boosters as a group seeking only to create a self-serving and perpetuating bureaucracy of new bureaus and agencies. According to Linck, such groups sponsored by "New Dealers" were seeking to saddle future generations with unpaid bills. Those coming to Alaska and especially veterans, she alleged, had been coaxed north with propaganda and unrealistic promises of how statehood would enhance their personal fortunes. They were in essence a fifth column that would force statehood on true Alaskans who wanted to remain independent.(11)

Her suspicions were not unfounded. Still many veterans saw the issues differently and were quite outspoken in their criticism of "Alaska's old aristocracy," who resisted statehood because they feared having to pay higher taxes. Thus the changes buffeting Alaska were deeply social as well as economic and political, increasingly centered

on the statehood issue in the late 1940s, and sharpened by the distinctions between the old and new Alaska of the prewar and postwar generations.

Meanwhile in the early 1950s the military boom continued inexorably to change the face of Alaska. With dramatic speed the skyline dominated by the shack, quaint cabin, and wanigan (Quonset hut with an attached entry) was replaced by modern high-rise structures, office buildings, hotels, and business offices in Fairbanks and Anchorage. However, the new architectural concept--"Form is function"--was especially prevalent in Alaska. It resulted in largely uninspiring building designs and lower forty-eight styles grafted onto older rustic forms to produce a unique "Alaskan gothic" that defied easy description.

Prices and wages skyrocketed. Small cabins without water or electricity rented for $150 monthly in 1950; building trades workers earned $200 weekly, waitresses could make $9.00 hourly, and cooks nearly twice that. Craft union members such as plumbers, steamfitters, electricians, carpenters, and painters experienced similarly high wages. However, prices outpaced wages, making Alaskan cities among the most expensive places to live in the United States. Contractors scrambled to complete military family housing projects on and off post, and the newly created Alaska Housing Authority began construction of low-cost housing in Fairbanks and Anchorage in 1952.(12)

A major boost to the Fairbanks economy was the decision by the Community Savings Bank of Rochester, New York, to finance Fairbanks's first large housing project, Fairview Manor, investing more than $3 million in the booming community. Generous Federal Housing Authority (FHA) funding brought the first real subdivisions and with them a slice of contemporary urban Americana to the North. Such basic economic activity stimulated the expansion of small businesses and the growing professional and service sector as spin-off benefits.

Statistics and before-after comparisons abound. Anchorage's population more than doubled in the nine months between April and December 31, 1950. Car registration exploded by 1,500 percent and school attendance by 1,000 percent. Such an across-the-board impact severely strained the ability of Alaska's urban communities to maintain basic social services, provide education, fire and medical protection, and law enforcement for a population that brought with it new ideas and assumptions and expected the amenities of the lower forty-eight states. To help fund swollen demands on budgets, city fathers simply condoned social crime like gambling and prostitution and with a wink and a nod gladly accrued tax revenues from these illicit enterprises.

As Alaska strained to accommodate the realities of militarization and crash development, the armed services themselves were undergoing modernization and reassessing their role in the postwar world, with marked consequences for Alaska. By the end of the war, as part of the general demobilization, Alaska-based forces were significantly reduced; installations were closed, placed on caretaker status, or sold to civilian contractors and entrepreneurs.(13)

BUILDING POSITIONS OF STRENGTH

While the presence of the armed services continued to decline in the immediate postwar period, worsening relations with the U.S.S.R. caused growing alarm among defense planners, who viewed the Soviet conventional build-up in Siberia with anxiety. It was recognized that

Alaska was of growing geographic and strategic importance, and it seemed unlikely that the territory could ever again be left defenseless. With the advent of the Great Circle Route over the pole, Alaska's military relevance increased steadily and assumed even greater importance during the postwar decades, reflecting changing military relationships and strategic doctrines.(14)

Apropos was the military analysis offered in the widely circulated U.S. News & World Report, which confirmed that Alaska would become America's most important defense frontier in the age of long-range bombers and guided missiles.(15)

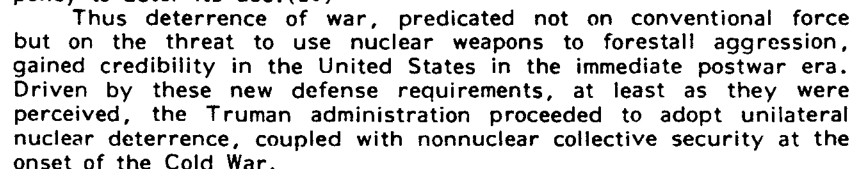
Concurrently the armed services underwent major reorganization, spearheaded by passage of the National Security Act of 1947. Among other innovations this legislation established the principle of joint military command "for the effective strategic direction of the armed forces and for their operations under unified control and for their integration into an efficient team of land, naval and air forces." Prior to passage of the National Security Act, however, the joint command concept had been extended to the territory and implemented with creation of the Alaska "unified" command. Thus it became the first of its kind to be activated in the United States during the postwar era.(16)

The new organizational structure eliminated the autonomous Army and Navy commands that had not functioned harmoniously in Alaska during the war. The old Army Air Force was abolished in 1948 and replaced the U.S. Air Force, which became the third component in the Alaska command triad. By the fall of 1947, the reorganized Alaska command consisted of the Alaskan Air Command, the U.S. Army Alaska, and the Alaskan Sea Frontier, all under a combined staff.(17) Alaska's first overall military commander was Lieutenant General Howard A. Craig, U.S.A., who reported directly to the Joint Chiefs of Staff.(18)

The mission of the military in Alaska during these postwar years was threefold. First priority was to maintain a strong deterrent to possible aggression from the Soviet Union. Second, Alaska afforded the military with an ideal training environment for the perfection and application of arctic and cold-regions combat operations. A third responsibility was to secure the staggering quantities of World War II material, equipment, and facilities that littered the Aleutians and many other areas of the territory.(19)

Postwar clean-up and training were duties that could easily be assumed by the Alaska Command. Open-ended confrontation with a powerful potential enemy fifty miles across the Bering Strait was a task of a different magnitude. The Second World War and the advent of nuclear weapons and intercontinental bombers compelled a dramatic change in traditional American foreign and defense policy. Unilateralism or diplomatic noninvolvement was no longer tenable. Obsolete too was American security provided by wide oceans and the luxury of having to mobilize only in reaction to distant crises, as in previous wars. The United States, it was now argued by theorists like Bernard Brodie and William Liscum Borden, had to "develop the habit of living with the Absolute Weapon," and pursue a defense policy to deter its use.(20)

Thus deterrence of war, predicated not on conventional force but on the threat to use nuclear weapons to forestall aggression, gained credibility in the United States in the immediate postwar era. Driven by these new defense requirements, at least as they were perceived, the Truman administration proceeded to adopt unilateral nuclear deterrence, coupled with nonnuclear collective security at the onset of the Cold War.



The end of the war in Europe also brought with it the end of the Grand Coalition, as the Allies were no longer confronted by a common enemy. Cooperation between the West and the Soviet Union vanished in a conflict over spheres of influence and security. The rivalry which emerged by 1946 between the United States and the Soviet Union assumed unprecedented dangers because it transcended traditional state balance-of-power interests to oppose equally messianic capitalist and communist ideologies in global struggle for preeminence. Thus as long as the two systems existed, the specter of undying tension and threat of nuclear holocaust loomed.

As United States-Soviet relations became increasingly abrasive, voices in Congress were again heard calling for the militarization of Alaska. Indeed, in a resolution reminiscent of military rule following the Alaska purchase, it was suggested in Congress that Alaska and other territorial dependencies of the United States be placed under the administrative authority of the Navy Department.(21) Delegate Bartlett responded angrily, "This would run counter to the traditional American system of government. It would end, perhaps forever, hopes for statehood. . . . It would be a sorry thing, indeed if at a time when we are fighting to preserve a free way of life we should be confronted with a substantial decline of democracy in Alaska."(22)

Bartlett was also adamant that Alaska should receive greater military priority. In February 1947 he warned, "Now as never before it is essential for us to build in Alaska a mighty fortress capable of withstanding the onslaught which might be made against it. . . . Alaska can either be the region furnishing protection for our nation or it can be the region from which the enemy can reach us. . . . The choice is ours. We cannot afford to sit idly by and see our northern outpost remaining undeveloped, either militarily or economically."(23) Bartlett's sentiments were echoed by others such as Representative Robert Sikes of Florida, who observed in March 1947 that he, for one, decried "the habit of hiding our heads in the sand and refusing to admit its [war's] possibilities or its consequences. . . . Alaska and the Aleutians offer sites as important as any in the world. There are powers which appreciate the importance of these sites. Apparently, we are not one of them for we are doing little or nothing toward their development. Alaska is now one of the key points in America's defense, a key point which is thinly held and easily isolated."(24)

Representative Sikes ended with the warning that "Alaska may be tomorrow's Pearl Harbor," while fellow Republican Representative Bertrand W. Gearhart of California told his peers ominously, "Soviet Russia is looking at Alaska with covetous eyes."(25)

Alerted by such claims, the national press reacted in the postwar years with numerous articles on Alaska defenses, and in 1948 an inspection tour was made by reporters from Time, Newsweek, and other national magazines. The media made much of the fact that few of the 20,000 troops in the Alaska Command were combat troops, that the Navy had no combat ships in Alaskan waters; they alleged that the Air Force had "so few planes" that Commanding General F. V. H. Kimble "will not permit newsmen to reveal their number." Rear Admiral Alfred E. Montgomery, commander of the North Pacific Area, Alaska Sea Frontier (1947-1949) was quoted as saying that "there is always the possibility that Russians will stop pushing. That is what we are praying for. The way things are now, if they don't stop, we won't have a prayer left."(26)

To ease the political impact of such allegations, the Truman administration dispatched General Eisenhower, then army chief of staff, to Alaska on a ten-day inspection tour, followed by General

Carl A. Spaatz, chief of the Army Air Force. General Spaatz spent two weeks in the territory, ascertaining the readiness of Alaska-based forces. Together their recommendations for increased strength levels were enthusiastically echoed by General Nathan Twinning, who succeeded Howard Craig as top man in the Alaska Command. Twinning led the campaign for what amounted to a three-year buildup of forces in Alaska, including the deployment of Strategic Air Command (SAC) B-39, B-36, and B-47 bombers by the early 1960s. However, before such commitments could become more than symbolic, Alaska's strategic importance and the politics of defense had to be clarified.

An 1948 article by Captain John J. Teal, Jr. U.S.A.F, in Foreign Affairs entitled, "Alaska: Fulcrum of Power" analyzed questions of statehood and national defense vis-a-vis Alaska's strategic importance. The author concluded that "granting statehood to the territory is the best and least expensive method of strengthening the defense of the area." However, he cautioned that "the process will take time." In the interim he recommended that two immediate steps should be to concentrate "strategical and tactical combat air units and approximately two highly trained regiments of ground troops." Beyond these modest proposals, however, the construction of highways necessary for supply, and the building of a railroad from Fairbanks to the continental United States were seen as priority defense needs. The author concluded that because the Russians apparently considered northern warfare feasible, the obstacles to be encountered in making Alaska a "fulcrum of power" constituted a challenge, "that we must accept."(27)

The question of Alaska's vulnerability to Russian attack was given greater weight in the spring of 1949 when General Dwight Eisenhower informed Congress that Alaska defenses were "in no shape to meet the potentialities of war." The goal of the Truman administration was "maximum deterrence at a bearable cost," to achieve greater security without the political liability of heavy taxation. "We need to be ready to fight in the Arctic; in Asia, the Near East and in Europe; by sea, by land and by air; with old weapons and with new weapons." Despite such warnings and policy statements the Alaska Command remained only a modest force and the closure, abandonment, or transfer of former military installations and airfields continued at a brisk pace.(28)

Alaskans generally had mixed feelings about the military during these uncertain years. Tens of thousands of acres had been temporarily withdrawn by the War Department during the war, and Alaskans wanted much of this land returned to the public domain. As the military cleaned up and phased out its operations, huge stockpiles of equipment, material, and structures became available as surplus. In April 1947 over $20 million of surplus government property was made available to Alaskans at giveaway or bargain prices.

Between 1949-1953 the Soviet Union perfected its nuclear capability, and the importance of the military in Alaska correspondingly received a large boost. Especially alarming to Alaskans was the Soviet Union's detonation of its first hydrogen bomb in September 1954 on Wrangell Island in the Arctic Ocean, 500 miles northwest of Nome. The Russians' rapid development of long-range bombers for the delivery of nuclear weapons and the testing of 800-mile range ballistic missiles surprised and alarmed American defense planners. The proximity of the Soviet Union across the Bering Strait and the possibility of the Cold War turning hot was dramatized in June 1955, when a Navy patrol plane was shot down near St. Lawrence Island.(29) The Soviet government apologized and compensated the United States for the loss of the plane, but that gesture and the safe

rescue of the crew did little to ease Arctic jitters. Still Alaskans were touched personally more by the provision of the McCarran Act, according to which Alaskans entering the United States were treated like foreign nationals in that they had to prove their citizenship.(30)

In 1944 the so-called Hoge Board--a joint Army-Navy team had been created to study Alaskan defense requirements and several subsequent Air Force groups--initiated the installation of an aircraft control and warning system of eighteen radar sites to improve communications and to track aircraft entering Alaskan air space. Along the Bering Sea coast installations were located at Naknek, Indian Mountain, Takotna, Sparrevohn, Cape Wales, Cape Lisburne, Northeast Cape, Cape Newenham, and Cape Romanzof, Tatalina, Champion, Tin City, and King Salmon. Regional control centers were set up at Murphy Dome, southwest of Fairbanks, and on Fire Island near Anchorage. Additional appropriations allowed for the expansion of the system to include sites at Middleton Island, Ohlson Mountain, Fort Yukon, Kotzebue, and Unalakleet. When completed in 1954, the entire system had cost $45 million.(31)

The reality of what the Cold War meant in defense dollars for Alaska and the Pacific Northwest was underscored when Air Force Secretary Stuart Symington announced in August 1949 that one of the nation's leading defense contractors and Seattle, Washington's largest employer, Boeing Aircraft, was to be relocated to Wichita, Kansas. Symington's rationale, as explained by Lieutenant General Kenneth B. Wolfe, deputy chief of the air force for materiel, was that massed Soviet bombers could easily reach Seattle from eastern Siberian bases, destroy Boeing, and return home without opposition. Wichita, however, was beyond the 2,400-mile effective range of the Soviet Air Force and thus would be safe from attack.(32)

Governor Gruening was asked by the Seattle Chamber of Commerce to attend an emergency meeting organized in an effort to reverse the relocation, which was then already in progress. In attendance also were Secretary Symington and General Wolfe. Gruening, in a "rambunctious" mood, was determined that "stupidities" committee by "military planners in Alaska" were not now to be perpetrated upon Seattle in another costly display of Defense Department "asininity."

When invited to speak, Gruening challenged the Air Force decision and charged that the "striking arm" of the military establishment was simply "turning tail and running to hide behind the Rockies." The eagle, symbol of power, concluded the governor sarcastically, had become "ostrich-headed and chicken-hearted." Noting that the Navy had no plans to move the massive Bremerton Navy Yard east to the Mississippi, Gruening enumerated point by point the flawed logic of the proposal and its disastrous consequences for Seattle's economy.

A crimson-faced Symington was challenged by Gruening to protect the Pacific Northwest by erecting a radar detection screen across Alaska and by basing fighter squadrons in the territory. This would be a forward strategy, Gruening argued, to deter, if not defeat, a Soviet air offensive before it could reach vital targets like Boeing or the Hanford nuclear reactor. Gruening's efforts galvanized opposition and were rewarded by Symington's decision not only to keep Boeing in Seattle but also to begin construction of Alaskan radar installations. This decision was an internal Air Force judgment. It was announced in November 1949 without congressional deliberation, as Congress was not then in session. The $40 million initially earmarked for the project was simply transferred within the Air Force fiscal appropriation for 1949.

The governor of Alaska had been instrumental in shaping Air Force policy regarding Boeing and the northern radar screen, and enjoyed both the satisfaction of a personal victory and the accrual of political IOUs in the process. When subsequently asked by Seattle Chamber of Commerce President Nat Rogers, what that body could do for Gruening and Alaska, the governor replied that it could endorse statehood, a position it had publicly rejected. However, dominated by business leaders who perceived Alaska's continued territorial status to be in Seattle's financial interest, the chamber refused to endorse statehood. Equating such attitudes to those of "King George III and his ministers toward the Thirteen Colonies," Gruening concluded bitterly that they think of Alaska only as "an area to be ruled and exploited by distant men through their representatives in the colony, but never to be treated on the basis of equality."(33) Thus, despite a growing recognition of Alaska's strategic importance, political and economic realities continued to dictate the territory's future.

During the 1950s most of the bases in the Aleutians were closed permanently and other were upgraded. Some units were redeployed in the interior nearer to major Alaska Command facilities, in what was referred to as the "heartland concept." The advent of strategic bomber fleets and intercontinental ballistic missile systems radically altered the face of war for strategists planning a possible massive nuclear exchange. By 1950 warning of an attack was suddenly reduced from hours to minutes, placing priority on detection and distant early warning facilities. Given this new danger, Alaska's security many argued was now synonymous with and, indeed, subordinated to defending the North American continent.

The new defense priorities underscored military thinking that "in any future war, Alaska would be the prize in transpolar air warfare." Indeed, in 1947 the Joint Chiefs of Staff decided that Alaska in the future would be a battleground for airmen. In such a battleground the key to Alaska's defense, the chiefs believed, was the interior heartland because only a concentrated defense establishment could be supplied adequately, could defend itself and could make sorties from central bases to counter attacking forces in outlying areas.

Such thinking predated Soviet nuclear capability; it dated from the time when the threat of conventional attack was preeminent and, alarmists alleged, inevitable. Still the concern in Washington was not to defend Alaska per se, but to assure the protection of cities in the "undefended heart of America," and the industrial complexes "centered around the Great Lakes, along the shortest and likeliest route of attack by bombers or guided missiles." Congressmen sensitive to this potential threat spoke grimly of "America's soft upper belly" and warned that "the armed forces must not be caught sleeping at Alaska as they were at Pearl Harbor." Clearly the psychological impact of December 7, 1941, like Munich, profoundly shaped postwar military thinking in the 1950s and 1960s.(34)

Indeed, Governor Gruening used the spectre of a surprise Soviet attack to great advantage in an article published in Newsweek in November 1949. "We could be taken tomorrow by a mini-scale airborne invasion--one parachute division, possibly two. If there is another Pearl Harbor it shall not be said that warning has not been given." Once again he combined arguments for defense with the benefits of statehood. "Statehood is inseparably connected with defense and we are convinced we will never get adequate defense until we get statehood." Not only would statehood signal United States resolve to exercise full sovereignty over Alaska, but arguably two senators and a representative would be far more likely to prevail in the Washington power struggle for defense dollars that the voteless

delegate then representing the territory. Gruening was effective in making Alaska a symbol of American virtue in the Cold War. "Our conflict with Russia is an ideological war. We are trying to convince mankind that a free society such as ours is more productive of happiness and more enduring than the police state. I know of no better way of demonstrating that they're building up such a society in these northern latitudes."(35) Soon after Gruening's article appeared, the Senate Armed Services Committee dispatched Senators Lester C. Hunt (D-Wyoming), Leverett Saltonstall (R-Massachusetts), and Wayne Morse (R-Oregon) to investigate Alaska's defenses. Subsequently the delegation recommended marginal increases and modernizations, but nothing on the scale envisioned by Gruening.(36) Statehood appeared to be going nowhere.

Such concerns were decidedly minority issues in Congress. In 1949 the defense authorization bill for the territory totaling $138 million was in jeopardy of being deferred. A concerned Governor Gruening wired Congress to inform lawmakers that such action "appears to us unbelievable. While Congress has just approved a $5,797,000,000 appropriation for Europe to check the advance of communistic totalitarianism across the Atlantic three to four thousand miles away, it denies less than 2½ percent of that sum . . . for the long overdue defense construction of [sic] American territory just 54 miles across the Bering Strait from our police neighbor. . . ." "Instead of making Alaska impregnable," the governor charged, "Congress . . . is perpetuating Alaska instead as America's Achilles heel."(37)

THE DEW LINE

In April 1948 James Killian, president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, published an influential paper entitled "For a Continental Air Defense," in which he first proposed that a radar detection system erected in the Arctic could protect the United States from surprise attack from massed bombers. During the summer of 1949, a series of top secret projects authorized by President Truman were conducted at MIT; among them Project Charles focused on the problems of continental defense outlined by Killian. Two years of research produced a massive three-volume study entitled Problems of Air Defense, which confirmed the fact that a defense against Russian bombers detected first by a Distant Early Warning System (DEW line) was feasible. New vacuum tube computer technology perfected by MIT in the Whirlwind model then designed for a civilian air traffic control system--the Semi-Autonomous Ground Environment (SAGE)--was operable. It could be linked to command centers and fighter-intercepter squadrons to counter Soviet bomber penetration over the Arctic en route to heartland American targets.

While the Air Force adamantly opposed such defensive-minded strategy, Truman was impressed. Compelled by domestic political concerns, he authorized creation of a special think tank, the Lincoln Laboratory at MIT, to begin work on systems for shooting down bombers. Despite warnings of rival scientists working for the Air Force's Santa Monica, California, Rand Corporation, who predicted that the imminent advent of ballistic missiles would render bomber defenses obsolete, President Eisenhower authorized construction of such systems in 1952. Quickly the United States entered into agreements for reciprocal continental-defense and warning systems to defend both the United States and Canada.(38)

The construction of Air Force installations at Point Barrow and Kaktovik was the first step toward implementing concepts of strategic hemispheric defense in the Arctic. The Joint Chiefs of Staff envisioned a defensive radar screen, or fence stretching from Point Barrow in Alaska eastward to Baffin Island in the Canadian archipelago. Such a joint undertaking represented a continuation of the mutual assistance agreements first inaugurated by the Canadian and American governments during the Second World War.

The Eisenhower administration and Congress gave full support to the implementation of these joint defense measures. As the president affirmed in 1953, "You of Canada, and we of the United States, can and will devise ways to protect our North America from any surprise attack by air." Warned the president, "Our security plans must now take into account Soviet ability to employ atomic attack" on the United States.(39)

The prime contractor for the DEW line project was Bell Laboratories, which provided civilian expertise and engineering assistance. A construction base was established at Anchorage in early 1952, and equipment began arriving in Kaktovik that August. With almost no practical experience to go on, arctic contractors pushed ahead with trial-and-error methods often adopted on the spot. The project was an engineering and logistics nightmare and, as one officer observed without too much exaggeration, "This full-scale attack on the Arctic is unparalleled in military construction history, and it is an unending tale of adventure and pioneering in electronics, engineering, transportation and operation."(40) Indeed, there is little question that, at the time of its construction, the DEW line was the most ambitious, sophisticated, and costly construction project ever attempted by the military.

Army, Navy, and Air Force personnel in addition to civilian work crews endured everything from the mosquito-ridden, saturated tundra conditions of the late Alaskan summer to -60 to -80° conditions during the winter, when construction could be accomplished only in the glare of artificial light. In February 1947 Air Force heavy-lift aircraft flew in hundreds of tons of supplies and material often in white-out conditions. It was the Navy, however, which initially bore the heaviest responsibility for getting construction material and heavy equipment into the Beaufort Sea. Huge convoys of ice breakers, victory ships, ocean tugs, barges, LSTs, repair vessels, and other ships left Seattle in July for Point Barrow, the main supply point. From Barrow the cargoes were loaded onto tracked cat trains for the cross-country trek to the radar sites.

Construction progressed secretly until 1952 when major commitments brought the project to public knowledge for the first time. By the following year the first DEW line station at Kaktovik was operational. At Point Barrow an old 1920s Navy oil-exploration camp was reactivated in December 1954; it was soon to become an important military and scientific facility. It was renamed the Naval Arctic Research Laboratory (NARL), where for the next twenty-five years scientists from major universities and institutes in the United States and Europe perfected their knowledge of arctic conditions and the northern military environment.(41) In 1959 the Point Barrow DEW line station was designated as administrative center for the entire early-warning network in the United States, the entire northern sector of which went into operational status on July 31, 1957. The Aleutian segment of the DEW line was dedicated on May 19, 1959, with Aircraft and Warning detachments stationed between Nikolski and Port Heiden.(42)

A well-staged dedication ceremony was held at Point Barrow on August 13, 1957 to mark the official transfer of the DEW line from the Western Electric Company to the Air Force. It was attended by territorial and national dignitaries and top Air Force generals. North America was now defended as never before, but Father Tom Cunningham, who offered the benediction, was philosophical and confided to a friend, "You will get your three hours of warning if and when an enemy attacks over the North Pole. I don't think it will ever happen, and the DEW line will never be used." "Probably 10 years from now," he predicted, "the Eskimos will be chasing the lemmings out of the abandoned buildings so they . . . can move in."(43) Within thirty-five years developments proved Cunningham accurate in his predictions, not because of reduced tensions but because more sophisticated technology had rendered the system obsolete.

NAVAL OIL

As early as 1922 renowned Arctic geologist Alfred H. Brooks predicted that not only would "oil be found in Alaska," but that "the potentials are that there are extensive [oil reserves] in the territory."(44) Oil was a strategic resource whose demand and consumption the war vastly accelerated, expanding America's vital national interests to the Middle East for the first time, where California Arabian Standard Oil Co. (later ARAMCO) was tapping Saudi Arabia's vast resources.

The war also spurred exploration in Alaska. Oil on the Kenai Peninsula had been known to exist since 1856, while on the North Slope discoveries had been one important consequence of Lieutenant George M. Stoney's exploration expedition of 1886.(45) Additional findings were made by government employees on Alaska's northwestern Arctic coast, where lakes of surface oil were said to exist. Near Point Barrow and to the east around the Canning River, explorer Ernest De K. Leffingwell had also found high-grade crude.(46)

Exploration and minimal production continued through the early 1920s, with wildcat operations producing small amounts of oil from wells at Puale Bay, Cook Inlet, and Katalla near the Kennicott mining town of Cordova.(47) Exploratory wells drilled by Standard Oil of California at Cold Bay in the Aleutians yielded nothing. Then in February 1923 President Warren G. Harding signed an executive order creating the 37,000-square mile Naval Petroleum Reserve No. 4 for strategic oil and gas production, recognizing that "the future supply of oil for the Navy is at all times a matter of national concern."(48)

The interwar years were devoted to U.S.G.S. topographic mapping and geological reconnaissance of the reserve, which indicated that substantial quantities of oil existed. By 1944 the world's supply of oil was being severely strained, and in the United States priority was given to accelerate production. The Navy began to develop its strategic reserves, and PET-4, as it was called, swarmed first with Seabee engineers and then civilian contractors, who probed the reserve east to Umiat atop the still undiscovered bonanza of Prudhoe Bay. The following year a conglomerate known as Arctic Contractors began to drill test wells in the Umiat region that showed the recovery potential for 100 million barrels of oil. Still the thirty-six wildcat wells drilled between 1944 and 1953 yielded no commercially viable oil or natural gas producers.(49)

In 1957 Richfield Oil Company began developing the Swanson River reservoir, and Union Oil Company was producing from the Kenai Peninsula. But it would not be until January 1969 that Atlantic

Richfield and Humble Oil Company announced the discovery at Prudhoe Bay that dramatically changed the future of the state. It had been the Navy and naval-contracted wildcatters twenty years before, however, who had pioneered exploration in PET-4 and given first indications of what riches lay beneath Alaska's wind-swept North Slope. Oil also figured importantly in preliminary statehood discussions involving land entitlements and partition, perhaps dictating the fact that Alaska would be one rather than two or more states. In 1953 the Alaska Statehood Commission met in Juneau to consider if all of the territory should be included in the prospective state. It rejected proposals to include only the most populous regions--the southcentral, southeastern, and interior region--because it was thought that the Navy had found large petroleum reserves on the North Slope. The Arctic, therefore, was likely to be the greatest source of wealth and tax revenues and could hardly be excluded.(50)

KOREA AND PREPAREDNESS

When the divisions of the North Korean People's Army (NKPA) poured across the 38th parallel into South Korea, what had been a backwater of American postwar diplomacy and defense priority suddenly became the front line of the Cold War and a symbol of the Truman administration's containment of communism. A bitter three-year struggle for control of the Korean Peninsula ensued, and the war provoked a dramatic response in Washington. The defense establishment was tripled in size and the defense budget was quadrupled. The subsequent rearmament of the United States brought with it the gradual rearmament of Alaska as well. Federal defense largesse leaped from $14.2 billion in 1950 to $50.3 billion by 1953, two thirds of all federal spending. In Alaska the Korean crisis translated into accelerated construction programs and force level commitments that brought $170 million in defense spending into the territory in 1952. America's crusade in Korea gave Alaska new importance, but because of the demands of the war, military priorities shifted to the Far East, not north to the Alaska Command. Still the war generally created a defense environment favorable to statehood and defense boosters. While condemned by conservative Republican critics for signaling a green light to communist aggression in Korea, Secretary of State Dean Acheson's major policy speech before the National Press Club in January 1950 heartened defense-minded Alaskans. "America's strategic defense perimeter" in the Pacific, affirmed Acheson constituted a line from the Aleutians to Japan, the Ryukus (Okinawa), and the Philippines.(51) The question was how well would that line be defended?

On Capitol Hill Washington's Democratic Senator Warren G. Magnuson and Bob Bartlett worked for bipartisan support for a "comprehensive Alaska defense and development program" and called for placing twelve divisions in Alaska. The military scoffed at such numbers. Although the Army would have welcomed greater clout in what was becoming an Air Force show, no serious consideration was ever given to such a large deployment.(52)

On September 18, 1950, the Alaska Command conducted an invasion-dependent evacuation drill in the territory's major cities. Alaska had not witnessed anything like it since the dark days of 1942. At Kodiak, wives and children were "tagged, checked off by lists," and marched to the waterfront in a driving rain to test the plan. At Fairbanks, Big Delta, Shemya, and Adak, dependents were hurried to airfields with bags packed. It was at Anchorage, how-