Why Alaska Needs Statehood

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At the general election in October, 1946 the people of Alaska voted for statehood. The question had been placed on the ballot by an act of the preceding, 1945, territorial legislature. This was the first opportunity Alaskans had had officially to record their desire. So a statehood bill was introduced in the first session of the present Congress, and hearings have been held both in Washington and throughout Alaska.

The reasons for statehood are ample.

First: Alaskans, being good Americans and therefore believing that American citizenship is the most precious possession in the world, desire that citizenship in full measure. They do not have it now. They cannot vote for President or Vice President. They cannot elect Senators or a Representative with a vote. The Alaska legislature's powers are limited by obsolete restrictions imposed by Congress thirty-five years ago, many of which Alaskans have sought repeatedly and vainly to have changed.

Second: Statehood is indispensable for the progress and development of Alaska, for a populated, thriving, strong Alaska as our northern and western rampart. That objective has not been, cannot be and will not be achieved under territoriality.

Alaska has been under the American flag for eighty years; it was on October 18, 1867, that the flag of imperial Russia was lowered at Sitka and the Stars and Stripes hoisted in its place.

In those fourscore years, the aboriginal population—Indians, Eskimos and Aleuts—has grown slightly, if at all, and numbers some thirty thousand. The white population, those who went to Alaska from the forty-eight states, today numbers sixty thousand. That sixty thousand is the total increase in four-fifths of a century of territorialism. In contrast, during that same period, the population of the United States increased by a hundred million.

In other words, Alaska, with an area one-fifth as large as the United States, vast resources, and a climate and physical conditions corresponding to Scandinavia and Finland with their thirteen million people, has developed very little. It is my conviction, shared by the majority of Alaskans, that territoriality is the major factor in retarding growth and development.

Alaska's history makes clear that the federal government's policies for eighty years have been marked by indifference and lack of knowledge. This indictment does not apply to any individual member of either the legislative or executive branches in Washington, or to either political party. The failure in Alaska arises from lack of continuity among the remote rulers of Alaska's destinies and in the circumstances inevitably surrounding faraway control. Alaska suffers from and is throttled by every variety of absenteeism: absentee industry control, absentee labor control, absentee government control.

During the first seventeen years that Alaska was under the flag, from 1867 to 1884, Congress passed just two laws dealing directly with Alaska. One made Alaska a customs district and the other gave the rich seal fisheries of the Pribilof Islands as a monopoly to a San Francisco company. This period has been rightfully termed "the era of neglect." During this generation, it was not possible to punish crime, to get married legally, to transfer or to deed property. Finally Congress adopted the Organic Act of 1884. But this Act was a misfit. It provided that the Code of the state of Oregon should apply to Alaska. But Oregon had a county system and Alaska had none, and all reference to county officials and county functions were therefore wholly inapplicable to Alaska. The Oregon Code provided that to be a member of a jury one had to be a taxpayer, and as Congress had provided no taxes from Alaska, there could be no juries in Alaska. The 1884 Act, however, did provide a Governor who had neither means nor appropriate law to establish a government, and for the next fourteen years, until practically the turn of the century, the annual reports of four consecutive Governors contained earnest pleas that Congress do something about it. Their pleas went unheeded. They went totally unheeded until the discovery of gold in the Klondike in the late nineties.

When those gold prospectors, coming from every state of the Union, found Alaska without any suitable body of law to make their livelihood secure, they began writing their Representatives and Senators, and Alaska experienced the beginnings of legislation. Not until 1912, however, fourteen years later, did Congress adopt a revised Organic Act which established a legislature and confirmed the representation of Alaska in Washington by a voteless delegate.

This Act of 1912 was likewise unsatisfactory. It

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was notable chiefly for what it forbade Alaskans to do. It is under that Act, adopted thirty-five years ago, that the Territory of Alaska has struggled to this day.

Since that time, for half a century the economy of Alaska has rested chiefly on two industries, salmon fisheries and gold mining, both at present languishing, partly as a result of federal policies. Alaska's other vast potentialities have remained undeveloped, chiefly owing to inappropriate laws imposed by Congress, conservation measures which have often not conserved but often have paralyzed, and an economy dominated by absentee whose chief purpose was to extract the wealth of Alaska as rapidly as possible, take it away with them and leave little or nothing within the Territory. During this eighty-year period, Alaska has poured close to $3 billion into the national economy in the form of federal income taxes. But little of that original investment some four hundred-fold; and in addition, it has paid contemporaneously several times the purchase price annually into the Treasury in federal income taxes. But little of that wealth has been plowed back for the development of Alaska.

Eighty years' experience—a period of colonialism longer than that of all but five states—has shown Alaskans conclusively that our Territory is a stepchild in the American family. Its voteless delegate can only plead, hat in hand, for the crumbs left on the national banquet table. Far from being, as is often mistakenly assumed, the object of special solicitude by the entire Congress whose ward the Territory is, Alaska has been and continues to be the victim of gross discriminations. Alaska, alone among the states and territories, has been excluded from the Federal Highway Act. The share of road funds during the last quarter of a century denied Alaska has been estimated at $300 million.

Only fifty-four miles away, across Bering Straits, the Soviets are pushing the limits of agriculture farther and farther north, producing new strains of grains and new crops, with agricultural experiment stations every hundred miles, and establishing a permanent farm population to support a new industrial, mining and military development; in Alaska, on the contrary, Congress has for years withheld the agricultural funds which, under its own acts, Alaska was and is entitled to. Under one of these acts alone Alaska's share should have been $3 million.

Alaska is handicapped by excessive maritime transportation rates—the highest in the world, in fact—imposed by what has become virtually a one-man owned absentee shipping monopoly, a monop-

This monopoly is intensified by the Maritime Act of 1920, authorized by Senator Jones of Seattle, which specifically discriminates against Alaska. No other part of the Union suffers similar discrimination. The Supreme Court of the United States, when appealed to, found that Congress had the right to discriminate against a territory.

Alaska's air rates from the States are double those which the same carriers charge elsewhere. Our protests go unheeded. The list of these discriminations is long. But what is highly pertinent is that the situation grows worse, not better, and that right now, when Alaska's development is more imperative than ever before, we are being deprived of basic necessities in fields beyond our territorial jurisdiction and control.

With 15,000 miles of coast line, over seven thousand miles longer than that of the entire United States, a coast not yet completely charted or buoyed, a coast subject to more weather than any other under the flag, with a population chiefly deriving its livelihood from the sea and depending upon and cherishing the service of its Coast Guard, Alaska lost, following the retrenchments of the last Congress, its Coast Guard District, whose headquarters have been removed to and consolidated with the Seattle district seven hundred miles south of our southernmost point.

One year before Pearl Harbor, the Army, Navy and Coast Guard requested the Carnegie Institute to conduct some important research dealing with terrestrial magnetism, radio transmission through the ionosphere, and other problems deemed of vital and pressing import. A location in northern latitudes was considered essential. Thereupon the University of Alaska offered a building and its servicing. Without this aid the start of the project would have been seriously delayed. To establish this research, valuable both in war and in peace, on a permanent basis, the 79th Congress authorized an appropriation of $975,000 for a geophysical observatory and laboratory on the campus of the University, the University having been deprived of the normal uses of the building it had made available for this research, and with the return of the student body plus the G. I. enrollees needing the accommodations sorely. But the 80th Congress refused to make the appropriation, although the project is a national one and is located in Alaska for scientific reasons.*

For twenty-five years, Territorial legislatures have memorialized the Congress to turn over the control and conservation of the fisheries to Alaska. Congress has turned a deaf ear. Presumably this great *since rectified in the second session.
national asset, the Pacific salmon, was too valuable to be turned over to Territorial management. Yet despite every plea, reiterated annually, Congress has never appropriated enough to safeguard this valuable resource which has now, after over a quarter of a century of federal control, become so depleted that in the fall of 47 Alaskans were warned that commercial fishing may have to be suspended in southeastern Alaska next year.

An overshadowing problem is that of tuberculosis. Its incidence in Alaska is shocking—nine times that of the United States. Five persons die every week in Alaska and perhaps 5 per cent of the population is affected by it. The greater proportion of the cases is among the so-called "native" population, Indians and Eskimos who received the disease originally from the whites. Now it is spreading among both "natives" and whites, the incidence among the latter being twice what it is among the white population in the States.

Apart from the personal tragedies—and they strike fatally two hundred and fifty times a year in Alaska—the economic damage is terrific. A tuberculous person is a charge on the community. He has no earning power and requires care. Moreover, a tuberculous person is a menace. Tuberculosis is a contagious disease. It is also a curable disease. Taken in time and given rest, isolation, and adequate nourishment—in short, hospitalization—the patient recovers.

Here is another example of flagrant neglect by the federal government. Tuberculosis has increased to its present dreadful proportions in Alaska because next to nothing has been done about it. The Indians' and Eskimos' education, health and welfare have for a generation been entrusted to the Office of Indian Affairs, an agency of the Department of the Interior. But the Congress has never appropriated adequately to meet this menace, which is becoming steadily aggravated by neglect.

What is needed is a sufficient number of hospital beds to give the victims of tuberculosis the required care. Likewise, the isolation of the patients, their prompt removal from their homes, prevents their infecting other members of the family.

The Territorial Legislature at a special session called in 1946 raised the annual appropriation for tuberculosis alone from $30,000 to $250,000 and has maintained that figure for the subsequent years. But the federal government that has had a specific responsibility in this field has made no corresponding effort. (It might be pointed out in contrast that Uncle Sam has just spent some $85 million in an effort to eliminate hoof and mouth disease in Mexico. While offering no criticism whatsoever of that expenditure, which was designed to prevent the spread of that destructive disease to cattle on our side of the border, it is somewhat ironic to contemplate the millions spent in a foreign country to cure cattle and next to nothing spent under our flag to cure human beings who are American citizens.)

Similarly, the federal funds for education have been so cut that an increasing number of Indian and Eskimo children have been denied the basic American right to schooling, while hundreds of others have been turned over to the Territorial school system without the financial assistance to the Territory which Congress in similar situations invariably has furnished the States.

One final illustration, the administration of justice—keystone of a democratic system. For over half a century, Alaska has sought to get the federal government, which has retained control of the judiciary in Alaska, to abolish its disgraceful system of unpaid U. S. Commissioners, who dispense justice in some sixty-odd smaller communities throughout Alaska. The issue is not even controversial. In 1914, Hudson Stuck, Archdeacon of the Yukon, second ranking Episcopalian churchman in Alaska, called it "vicious" and a "crying evil," and wrote that for twenty years—which takes us back to 1894—every federal administration had been urged to reform it. Bills sponsored by the responsible executive agencies have been hopefully introduced into Congress again and again, but always die before enactment. Do we require better evidence of Alaska's need for the sovereignty of statehood?

That conclusion has been greatly hastened by the rediscovery of Alaska which took place incidental to World War II. At its outbreak Alaska was defenseless. The famous warning of General Billy Mitchell that "he who holds Alaska holds the world" has gone unheeded. As late as 1949, the only military or naval installation in Alaska was an infantry post manned by two hundred men, dating from the gold rush days. For years, our Delegate in Congress had been pleading for an adequate military and naval program in Alaska, but little attention is paid to the warnings of a voteless delegate. In consequence, Alaska was the only part of the American continent to suffer invasion, which required a vast campaign, costly in the expenditure of men, ships and matériel to expel it. There is little question that had Alaska been a sovereign State at that time, and its defense need presented with the cogency which two United States Senators could have given it, the Aleutian campaign would never have taken place and American lives would have been saved. Today, Alaska is even more important strategically than during the second World
War. And it is as little defended against future eventualities as it was then.

Consider that Alaska is the only part of the American continent which stretches westward into the Eastern Hemisphere, and that its Pacific coast line is longer than that of our three Pacific Coast states. Consider that it is the only part of the continent which is not separated from the rest of the world by an ocean rampart and that Siberia is visible to the naked eye from the shore of Alaska! Moreover, Alaska is the only part of the continent under the American flag which fronts on the Arctic Ocean, one of the great airways of the future. Alaskans are familiar with these facts and their implications, which to most Americans are remote and unknown. From the defense standpoint alone, the nation would be immeasurably strengthened by having in the halls of Congress two United States Senators and a Representative with a vote, intimately familiar with Alaska’s vast terrain, and its immediate potentialities.

But apart from that, Alaskans have another vital contribution to make. Alaska is known as “our last frontier.” To it, from the States, have been attracted the pioneering breed of Americans, who throughout our history have pushed westward in search of greater freedom and greater opportunity. The Alaskan is the robust type of individualist who is not afraid of hard work and is independent in thought and deed. Alaskans represent the vigorous survival of a spirit, an attitude, and a way of life that once was everywhere in America. They will contribute to the councils of the nation the initiative, the hardihood and the character which have built our great country.

The President of the United States has declared himself in favor of statehood for Alaska. So has the able Secretary of the Interior, Julius A. Krug. The Governors of the States unanimously, at their 39th Annual Conference last July, endorsed statehood for Alaska.

It is for Congress now to materialize our democratic principles, to speed the long overdue development of Alaska, to make fully available its resources, human as well as material, and, for the welfare of its people as well as for the safety of our Western Hemisphere, to grant Alaska statehood NOW.

Since the above was written the House SubCommittee on Territories, which has made a thorough investigation of Statehood, has reported the bill favorably by unanimous vote. The Committee consists of 17 voting members. Subsequently, the full Public Lands Committee, consisting of 25 voting members, likewise by unanimous vote, reported the bill favorably. Considering the wide diversification of its membership this is fairly persuasive evidence of the validity of Alaska’s Statehood cause.

However, when the leadership of the House was asked for its consent to a "rule" - a procedure necessary in order to bring a bill onto the floor for a vote - the Speaker declined on the ground that the Senate would not even act favorably at that session (the second session of the 80th Congress) on the Hawaiian Statehood bill, and therefore certainly not on the Alaska bill. It was, in consequence, he stated, useless to try and get the Alaska Statehood bill passed by the House only. The Statehood bill, therefore, will be introduced at the opening of the 81st Congress in January, 1949.