

2005

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Recommended Citation

Skillbred, Dane (2005) "Getting Defensive: Excuses for the Construction of the Alaska Highway," *Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II*: Vol. 10, Article 12.

Available at: <http://scholarcommons.scu.edu/historical-perspectives/vol10/iss1/12>

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Getting Defensive: Excuses for the Construction of the Alaska Highway

Dane Skillbred

The construction of the Alaska Highway (also referred to as the ALCAN Highway) has been regarded as one of the greatest projects in American history. The highway spans a distance of over fifteen hundred miles from Dawson Creek, British Columbia to Fairbanks, Alaska. It was constructed during World War II after the Japanese attacks on the Aleutian Islands, specifically those on the ports of Dutch Harbor, Attu, and Kiska. These attacks are widely held to be the direct reason for the United States government's decision to build the road, along with the fear that a Japanese invasion of Alaska was imminent.

As a challenge to this view, one must ask why a road being built to Fairbanks, Alaska was necessary to defend Alaska against a Japanese attack on the Aleutian Islands. If the Japanese invasion of Alaska was such a looming threat, why was the road to Alaska not extended to the coast close to the Aleutian Islands rather than to the center of Alaska? While it makes some sense that the United States government would want to bring military supplies to Alaska in a timely fashion in an emergency, it does not make sense that the government would attempt to do so by constructing a road that leads to a part of Alaska that is far from the area of concern. In fact, it could be argued that the government was discussing a road to Alaska many years before its construction in 1943, and the "de-fense" of Alaska was not the most important focus of

discussion. There were mainly economic, as well as some political and social, reasons for constructing the Alaska Highway that were greater factors in the deliberation to build it than was national defense.

The discussion on the project today seems more concerned with how the Alaskan Highway was built, the planning that was involved, and the social implications related to its construction, rather than the motivations for its creation. Historian J. Kingston Pierce compares the military effort in the project to that of the military in building the Panama Canal. He discusses the long hours without sleep that troops spent working on it, as well as the battles with the wilderness they had to endure.¹ John Krakauer also describes some of the effects of nature on the troops, namely the boggy marshes that engineers had to move through and the ice and extreme cold present in the wintertime.² These two authors write briefly about hearings in Congress, but their discussion seems to be concerned mainly with the actual construction of the highway. The motivation for the highway's construction is never in question.

It seems logical that the desire for the Alaska Highway not be in question. The reason for it being pushed through Congress may well have been purely for national defense. The national defense argument, however, does not explain why the highway was proposed in Congress as early as 1933. It does not

¹J. Kingston Pierce, "The Biggest and Hardest Job Since the Panama Canal," *American History* (Feb. 2001): 52-58. Academic Search Elite (accessed January 27, 2004).

²John Krakauer, "Ice, Mosquitoes, and Muskeg – Building the Road to Alaska," *Smithsonian* (July 1992): 102-112. Expanded Academic Index (accessed January 28, 2004).

account for the fact that the proposed highway was built not in the direction of the areas being attacked and invaded by the Japanese, but rather significantly to the northeast of them. Historian M.V. Bezeau writes that the road was already a foregone conclusion to help the United States economy, and the Japanese attack on the Aleutian Islands was just enough to legitimize the American presence in the Northwest.³ There is clearly room to challenge the view that the U.S. built the Alaska Highway purely to defend against a Japanese threat.

The first point of contention against the argument for national defense is the route the army took in its construction of the highway. The finalized route went through mountain ranges and swamps. The army argued that supplies could more readily be transported through air force flights inland along this route where flying conditions were better.⁴ However, what is interesting is that the army was not willing to build a highway toward southwest Alaska, where the Japanese attacks had occurred. Looking at the following map, it seems quite reasonable for the army to have built a road through the pass between the Kuskokwim Mountains and the Alaska Range toward Bristol Bay as indicated by the dashed line (roughly the last 650 miles of the chosen route is indicated by the solid line). The mountain route would have given naval forces a much more direct route to Dutch Harbor, and the

³M.V. Bezeau, "The Realities of Strategic Planning: The Decision to Build the Alaska Highway," in *The Alaska Highway: Papers of the 40th Anniversary Symposium*, Kenneth Coates, ed. (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985), 33.

⁴"Alaska Road Inquiry Off," Special to the New York Times, *New York Times*, June 17, 1942. p. 4.

Aleutian Islands, than a trip from Fairbanks, through Valdez, around the Gulf of Alaska and the southwestern peninsula to the same place. According to historian M.V. Bezeau, however, the highway was never meant to be a supply route to the Aleutians.⁵



Beside the troubling fact that the road was not built along the simple mountain passage toward Bristol Bay, it did not really “shorten” the route from the continental states to Alaska all that much. Simply looking at distances, one might deduce that the Alaska Highway would not make the trip for troops and supplies any easier. For instance, the flying distance

⁵Bezeau, 33

⁶Alaska Tour and Travel, “Alaska Map.”
www.alaskatravel.com.

from Seattle to Dutch Harbor is about 2000 miles. The distance from Fairbanks to Dutch Harbor, however, is about 900 miles. It seems the idea of building a highway that spans 1500 miles, only to connect to another highway that spans 1500 miles, to reach a city that falls 900 miles short of the area the U.S. military was trying to defend would not shorten the time of reaching it at all.⁷ Because the distance from the continental United States to Dutch Harbor was not sufficiently cut, other motivations need to be examined to explain the construction of the Alaska Highway.

Common sense indicates that the economic impact such a project would have on the Alaskan economy as well as the economy of the whole United States was a strong motivation. For years before World War II there had been discussion in Congress about building a highway to Alaska. As early as 1930, Herbert Hoover had suggested the study of a link between Alaska and the lower 48 states.⁸ The discussion of the link had little to do with the defense of the territory at the time. The Department of the State, in its study of the territory, felt that the road would help in the “development of natural resources,” the “development of tourist traffic,” and the “promotion of good will and trade between Canada and the United States, by facilitating travel between the two countries.”⁹ Any discussion of the defense of Alaska was completely missing. What was important in the study, though, was the idea that

⁷Estimates from www.webflyer.com, WebFlyer Network.

⁸Alaskan.com, “The Alaskan Information Center,” <http://alaskan.com/gen-info.html>.

⁹U.S. Department of State, *Report of the Commission to Study the Proposed Highway to Alaska*, Conference Series, No. 14. (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1933), 23.

the increased output of exports from the territory would outweigh the cost of building the road.¹⁰

Historian Kenneth Coates argues that the riches in the Canadian Northwest were on people's minds for years. At the turn of the 20th century, the Klondike gold rush had piqued great interest, and that interest was revived in 1920 when oil was discovered in the Mackenzie valley of British Columbia. The thought of this land's immense resources never escaped public consciousness.¹¹ In fact, those resources were the main topic of conversation in the Alaska legislature's memorial to Congress of 1933. The legislature wrote a letter to be read in Congress asking them to reintroduce dialogue about the vast economic opportunity in the territory of Alaska, and to initiate conversation on a highway to Alaska. The letter described the economic depression occurring in the territory, and the only emergency they seemed to cite was that of the urgent financial problem.¹² It seems the whole point of the letter was for the Alaskan legislature to give Congress an idea of the wealth that would be gained in the transaction. Save for one small paragraph about the instability in the Far East, which did not make a strong case, the legislature dealt only with economic issues.¹³

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 44.

¹¹Kenneth Coates and W.R. Morrison, *The Alaska Highway in World War II* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 13-14.

¹²U.S. Senate, House Joint Memorial 5, *The Congressional Record*, 73rd Congress, Vol. 77, Part 5 (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1933), 5058.

¹³*Ibid.*, 5058-9

Discussion in Congress continued to neglect the defense argument for the better part of the next decade. In an address to Congress, Senator Clarence C. Dill of Washington argued that since there was talk of a highway through Mexico, there should be talk of one through Canada to Alaska.¹⁴ It seemed only logical that a road should be built connecting the U.S. and its territories. In fact, Senator Robert R. Reynolds of North Carolina furthered the argument by saying, "The greatest industry on earth is the tourist industry. This would add to the tourist industry of America as well as of our sister countries to the north and south, and would create for us a warmer bond of friendship."¹⁵ Three years later in the House of Representatives, Warren G. Magnuson of Washington made the case for the opening of industry as well. By opening new territories, the U.S. could finally make use of the land that they had purchased from the Russians seventy years before.¹⁶ Magnuson continued on about everything from population growth, to the welfare of Alaskans and the interconnectedness of the United States. The whole argument, however, was based on economics, never once mentioning defense of the region.¹⁷ The government's stress on the monetary value of the Alaska Highway would be the frame for discussion throughout the period before World War II, rather than any argument based on defense.

¹⁴U.S. Senate, *The Congressional Record*, 73rd Congress, Vol. 78, Part 11 (U.S. Government Printing Office 1934), 11620.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 11621.

¹⁶U.S. Senate, *The Congressional Record*, 75th Congress, Vol. 81, Appendix, Part 10 (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1937), 1775.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 1775-77

Not only was the debate in Congress based on assessment of economic opportunity, but the national media also focused on the same frame of reference. The *New York Times* portrayed the construction of the Alaska Highway as a great financial and cultural advantage to the whole United States. One particular article highlighted the possibilities for future production in Alaska. Alaskan miners felt that Alaska could be a permanent settlement for Americans as well as a place for tourists to visit. The vast resources present in Alaska could provide jobs for people if they had adequate transportation to the territory.¹⁸ Even as late as 1939, the editor ran a story that featured engineer Donald MacDonald of Fairbanks speaking to the economic power of the region. He believed that the highway was a way for people to see the wildlife and beautiful summer settings. It would also give miners and farmers a chance to make new beginnings.¹⁹ Clearly the media's center of attention was on the markets and opportunities the Alaska Highway could potentially open up.

The discussion in Congress of a road to Alaska gradually changed. Talks moved from dialogue about the development of resources and production toward talk of defense of the territory. One can reasonably deduce that since the economic argument was not enough to convince the Congress, discussion was forced to defense. Historian David Remley argues that talks in Congress were stalled until the attack on Pearl

¹⁸"Highway from Seattle Hailed by Alaskans as Big Boon." *New York Times*, Jan 5, 1930, p. E2.

¹⁹"Engineer Hopeful of Alaska Highway: MacDonald, Here, Portrays Wide Advantages of Project." *New York Times*, Jan 12, 1939, p. 23.

Harbor. He says that the fear of the Japanese was what finally pushed the governments of both the U.S. and Canada to agree on the proposal to build the highway.²⁰

Even before the attacks on American harbors, as the international climate changed, congressmen slowly started framing their discussion around defense of Alaska. Rep. Magnuson made another speech in the Congress in October 1941, this time shifting the discussion to defense as well as resources. His message was that the highway would be a “great adjunct to the national defense,” as well as “an incalculable factor in the development of the great resources of British Columbia and interior Alaska.”²¹ In August 1941, the Alaska legislature had been making similar statements, but played on emotion much more vividly. In a telegram to Congress, the legislature felt that the fall of Russia was “seemingly imminent,” and that military presence was drastically necessary.²² While some military advisors may have suggested the possibility of an attack from Japan through Alaska, it was not widely accepted that Alaska was an immediate target. The legislature used the argument that it was completely isolated except by sea and air. The idea that Japan would bother conquering Alaska to reach the continental United States when there was no route from Alaska to the continental United States for them

²⁰David Remley, “The Latent Fear: Canadian-American Relations and Early Proposals for a Highway to Alaska,” in *The Alaska Highway*, 1-3.

²¹U.S. House of Representatives, *The Congressional Record*, 78th Congress, Vol.87, Appendix, Part 14 (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1942), p. 4923-25.

²²*Ibid.*, 3964.

to travel on seems unreasonable. The legislature's claims were simply exaggerations without sufficient evidence to support them.

Other such claims came from the engineer who just one year previous had said the Alaska Highway would be used mainly for tourist attractions. In an article in the *New York Times*, Donald MacDonald had argued about the economic and social benefits of the highway. In *Liberty* magazine, however, he changed his opinion to include the necessity of a highway for defense from hypothetical threats.²³ He conjectured that a threat might one day come, and that the United States should protect the precious resources in Alaska.

This sort of rhetoric was adopted by the media around the country throughout the war period. The *New York Times* published articles in favor of the Alaska Highway, using military reasoning for the project. Secretary of the Interior, Harold L. Ickes, wrote one such article. The article argued that Alaska provided a crossroads for many key centers around the world, making it seem that it was the closest part of the U.S. to almost all locations across the globe.²⁴ He masked his discussion of the enrichment of resources inside the territory of Alaska with ideas that it was the center of the world for strategic positioning.

Other reporters skirted the issue of the economy like Ickes had. Richard L. Neuburger of Oregon discussed the possibilities of a canal project to Alaska in

²³Donald MacDonald, "Defenseless Alaska – The Ramparts we Don't Watch – Danger in the North – an Eye-opening Look at a Grave but Unheeded Peril, and What can be Done About It," *Liberty*. (July 20, 1940).

²⁴Harold L. Ickes, "Bastion and Last Frontier." *New York Times*, Jul 26, 1942.

an article in 1941. The idea in the Oregon legislature was that this canal could provide for defense, even though its main purpose would have been for shipping lumber.²⁵ He started out with the defense argument, and then the article became a venue for discussion of assured profit. Neuberger extended the discussion about the Alaska Highway in 1942, with an article entitled “America’s Burma Road.”²⁶ This time, the discussion was more about defense, but again had the hint of economic interest in the Northwest region. The article seemed to be a tool to rally emotion from the American public, with the final passage about the completion of the Alaska Highway stating: “It will be a great day for Donald MacDonald – and a sad one for Hitler and Hirohito.”²⁷ The idea was that an engineer would be happy with the project because of its potential, and the “evil leaders” would be exposed to attack through Alaska. The second argument does not hold because it would be more efficient to make a direct path from the continental United States to Japan and the highway never was a strategic blow to the Japanese, let alone the Germans. The protection of Alaska was an excuse for constructing a resource highway.

If the main reason for constructing the Alaska Highway had been for the protection of Alaska, then it was a terrible failure. In 1944, the Alaskan International Highway Commission deemed the project just

²⁵Richard L. Neuberger, “Inland to Alaska.” *Sunday Oregonian*, Portland, May 27, 1941.

²⁶Richard L. Neuberger, “America’s Burma Road,” *Sunday Oregonian*, Portland, April 26, 1942, 1.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 4

that, a failure.²⁸ The highway commission had been created as a subcommittee in Congress in the 1930's. They felt the highway did not serve the purpose that it had set out to fulfill. It had not ever been used to protect the people of Alaska, and it certainly never aided in a front against the Japanese.

Many other observers of the project did not share the sentiment that the Alaska Highway was a failure. *The New York Times* ran articles about the success of expeditions in the Canadian Northwest and in Alaska. Reporter Theodore Strauss mentioned the booming industry in the territories because of everyday discoveries of vast resources, even during the war.²⁹ Others argued that the highway might improve future relations between Alaska and Canada. The argument was that the highway would be mutually beneficial to both countries after the war.³⁰ While the sentiment may have been that both groups would benefit equally, the U.S. has been the primary recipient of the revenue from the Alaska Highway.

The government, as well as some members of the mass media, used propaganda to their advantage in bringing Canada along to finance a highway that was more beneficial to Americans. There is an argument that the U.S. government purposefully moved forward on construction of the highway to claim a sort of political sovereignty over Canada. Historian Curtis R. Nordman argues that, in order to save face, the Cana-

²⁸"Calls Alaska Highway Failure," *New York Times*, May 9, 1944.

²⁹Theodore Strauss, "ALCAN Road Booms Vast Untamed Area," *New York Times*, Jan 1, 1943.

³⁰Hurg Gordon Miller, "Alcan Highway," *New York Times*, Feb 3, 1943, E9.

dian government was forced to pay \$123,500,000.³¹ The majority of this was for staging routes on the Alaska Highway. Not only that, but the Canadian government has been forced to pay for the constant improvements on the highway since its completion.³² While the Alaska Highway has benefited Canadians to an extent in the post-World War II era, many see it as a passage for Americans from the Continental U.S. to Alaska. The trip through the Canadian Northwest has drawn revenue from tourists on their way to Alaska, but the majority of their money has been spent in Alaska. It is as if Canada were only a stepping-stone that the United States government had to overcome to connect its territories. The movement for the Alaska Highway was just another example of Americans' sentiment for political supremacy over Canada.³³

Beside the political ramifications the venture had on Canada, there were social indicators that might help to put the Alaska Highway project into an even larger context and give it a complete perspective. The majority of the United States army workers for this job were black. It is believed by some that the highway was an attempt to separate blacks and whites because of racial tensions in the military. President Roosevelt had it in mind to keep a sizeable part of black troops in a remote area away from white troops during the

³¹Curtis R. Nordman, "The Army of Occupation: Malcolm MacDonald and U.S. Military Involvement in the Canadian Northwest," in *The Alaska Highway*, p. 92.

³²P.J. Philip, "Canada to Repay U.S. for Air Routes." *New York Times*, Mar 1, 1944.

³³Nordman, 83.

war.³⁴ The perfect opportunity would be in a remote area like the Pacific Northwest. This was one social problem for the U.S. solved by the construction of the Alaska Highway.

One other social problem solved during the project was that of disconnection between Alaska and the continental U.S. due to a lack of communication technologies. Theodore Strauss argued that communication was tough even for the army. The only news that they could receive was from Japanese and sometimes Russian radio stations.³⁵ Alaska was without telephone service, and could only reach the rest of the United States through telegram. By the end of the war, a telephone system was constructed along the highway, which helped to unite Alaska with the contiguous part of the country.³⁶ While these seemingly small social implications do not add up to much in the grand scheme of the need for a highway to Alaska, they help to put the whole picture of its conception into context.

Looking at the entire picture, it seems that the need for military defense of Alaska was not the most substantial piece of the puzzle. Bezeau would argue that the Alaska Highway did not contribute significantly to the defense of Alaska.³⁷ Even during the early stages

³⁴E. Valerie Smith, "The Black Core of Engineers and the Construction of the Alaska (ALCAN) Highway," *Negro History Bulletin*, v51, Dec, 1993: 22-37. Expanded Academic ASAP. (accessed Jan 7, 2004).

³⁵Theodore Strauss, "ALCAN Cold Numbs Men and Machines," *New York Times*, Dec 31, 1942.

³⁶Associated Press. "Final Link Is Opened In Telephone to Alaska." *New York Times*, Nov 21, 1943.

³⁷Bezeau, 33.

of the war, the military did not back a road to the territory of Alaska. There was no justification for it.³⁸ The highway never even accomplished the military goal of taking pressure off of the Aleutian Islands. Coates writes that the Alaska Highway lost its importance in the scheme of the war because the Japanese threat to Alaska fell dramatically after the initial attacks on the Aleutian Islands.³⁹ It makes no sense that the road would have been built for defense reasons, when it was not used for that purpose during World War II.

What does make sense is the Alaska Highway's significance to the history of the Alaskan economy. Because of the road, tourist families from all over the United States can more easily make the trip to Alaska. The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* ran a story on one such family, the Coogle's, in 1959. The family may not have been able to make the trip without the road, but in 1959, they finally made the drive all the way from Georgia to Alaska with its improved conditions for tourists. They had wanted to explore the adventure that is Alaska, just as so many other families had wanted to before the construction of the highway and since its completion.⁴⁰ Tour buses have provided transportation to Alaska, and brought money into the state with increased expenditure. Even neglecting the increase in tourism, Alaskans have been better off with the highway because of its benefits of cheap transportation. With the oil, seafood, and many minerals in Alaska, exporting goods to other places has been

³⁸*Ibid.*, 26.

³⁹Coates, 69.

⁴⁰Annie Lou Hardy, "There's Goal in Alaska," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Jun 14, 1959.

facilitated by the highway.⁴¹ All of these products have bolstered the Alaskan economy and have given an extra source of useful natural resources to the continental United States.

The construction of the Alaska Highway has provided numerous opportunities for the state of Alaska, and from Alaska to the rest of the country. While many point to the need for the defense of Alaska as the primary reason for the construction of the highway, it is clear that Japanese attacks were only the final straw that helped the government gain support for the project. The economic success of Alaska has been greatly helped by the Alaska Highway, and the economic impact on Alaskan industries was, as were certain political and social factors, far more important than military defense in the motivations of those interested in constructing the highway. The economy was what drove the idea of the Alaska Highway to Congress. The need for military defense was just a measure used to bring those unsure of the project to support it.

⁴¹Lee Huskey, "Import Substitution: The Hidden Dynamic in the Growth of Frontier Regions," *Growth and Change*, 16 (Oct 1985): 43-55. Academic Search Elite (accessed Feb 20, 2004).