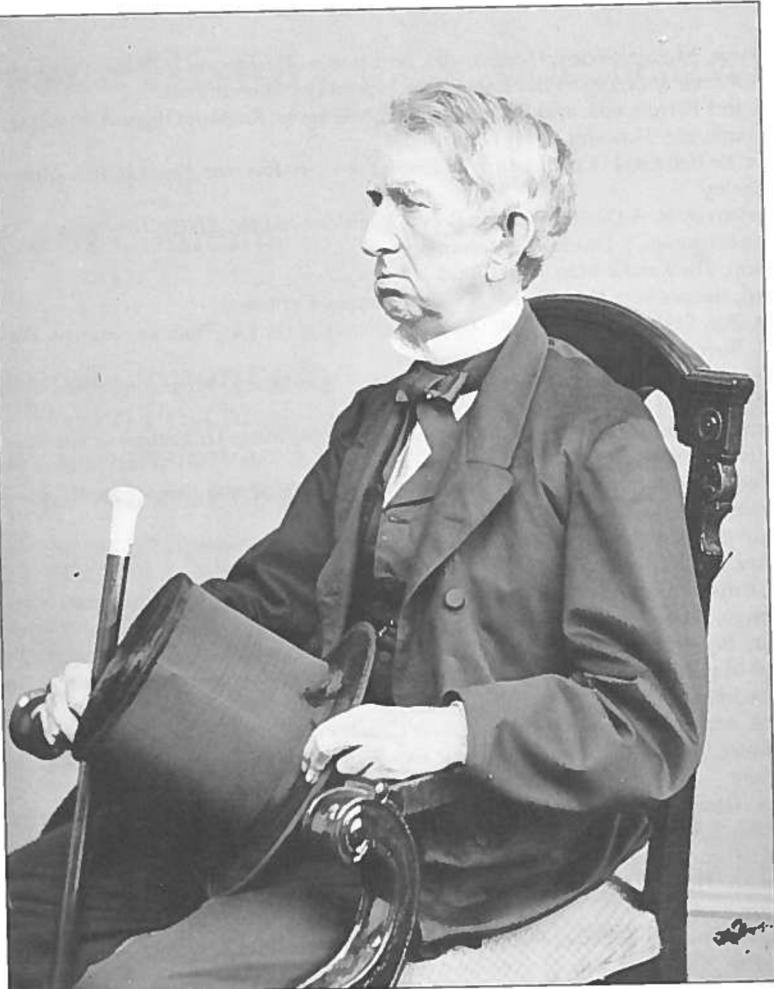

Secretary of State William Henry Seward. Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress. (LC-B813-1431A)

Manifest Opportunity: The Alaska Purchase as a Bridge Between United States Expansion and Imperialism

Mary Alice Cook

In 1893, historian Frederick Jackson Turner famously asserted that the nation's frontier had been settled to the point that it could no longer be said to exist. Therefore, he noted the end of a great pioneering movement that, according to him, explained United States democracy and defined the national character. Strangely, Turner failed to mention the existence of Alaska, a United States possession in the continental far north and a massive, unsettled frontier. His omission highlights the fact that from the date of its purchase in 1867, Alaska had resisted easy classification among the territories acquired by the United States. The remote section of the continent was not purchased to provide cheap land to farmers or to exemplify the national character, and some historians have incorrectly assumed that Alaska represents an anomaly in the nation's expansion. But an examination of the timing and circumstances of its acquisition, the singular actions (and non-actions) of Congress in connection with its purchase, and its stated purpose as an entree to empire, reveals that the purchase was no random anomaly, but rather a studied step in a strategy to achieve United States global commercial dominance. The Alaska Purchase was a bridge that both linked and separated the nation's pioneering expansion of the early nineteenth century and its overseas imperialism at the century's end.[1]

The acquisition of Alaska occurred at an economically propitious moment for the United States. Diplomatic historian Walter Lafeber pointed out that the most positive aspect of the moment was the burgeoning United States economy, which prompted expansion advocates in the 1850s to shift their emphasis to commercial rather than territorial goals. When Abraham Lincoln took office in 1861, the nation's tremendous economic success compelled it to focus increasingly on the acquisition of foreign markets for its manufactured goods. Lafeber argued that 1870-1889 were years of preparation for a new United States empire that was beginning to form, an extra-continental, commercial empire, in which Alaska would be a link in a strategic chain designed to con-

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trol future markets in Asia. The need for such control appeared to be vindicated by the glut of American goods which caused periodic financial panics and concomitant social unrest between 1873-1893. As the nineteenth century wore on, the nation's business and government leaders looked increasingly to foreign markets as a means of removing the cause of domestic discontent.[2]

The moment was also the right one for the United States to make a significant departure from its previous pattern of territorial acquisition; for the first time, the nation acquired land that was not contiguous with the other states. Prior United States expansion had been explained as a process that was both inevitable and inexorable. Early twentieth-century political scientist Pitman B. Potter echoed that assumption when he insisted that the pioneers moved in a natural process into nearby, empty territory.[3] But six hundred miles separated the southern tip of the Alaska panhandle from northwest Washington. The difficulties inherent in a journey from the contiguous United States to a destination in southeast or interior Alaska in the late nineteenth century made pioneering to Alaska considerably more arduous than a move into nearby, unsettled territory. The successful conclusion of negotiations with Russia for the purchase of Alaska, followed by ratification of the treaty of cession and appropriation of funds for payment, announced the nation's willingness to procure land that was detached from the existing states, and established a precedent for its acquisition of insular territory thirty years later.

Furthermore, Congressional handling of the $7 million appropriation to pay for Alaska directly impacted United States expansionist action—or rather lack of in—in the decades immediately following. In his examination of the Alaska Purchase, diplomatic historian Paul S. Holbo reported that prior to Congressional debate over the appropriation, the Russian government hired Robert J. Walker, an avid expansionist and leading Washington D.C. lawyer, to lobby Congress on its behalf. In response to charges that congressmen and newspaper editors had been bribed for their support of the appropriation, Congress opened an investigation in December 1868. The report, issued two months later, declined to pass judgment on Russia, a government friendly to the United States, and exonerated the scandal's leading suspects. However, a minority report directed at Walker criticized him harshly for failing to publicly disclose the fact that he lobbied on behalf of a foreign government. Despite the Congressional action, many Americans believed the appropriation for the purchase had been rank with corruption, and that the expansionists who secured it did so from their own motive for profit.

Public memory of corruption attached to the Alaska Purchase thus helps explain the absence of further territorial acquisitions until the 1890s. Holbo accused historians of failing to appreciate the taint left by the Alaska investigation, and its effect over the next twenty-five years on expansionist projects. He cites as evidence a newspaper's attack on President U. S. Grant's campaign to annex Santo Domingo in the early 1870s. The paper accused other representatives of the press who, "influenced by the promise of reward, as they were in the case of Alaska, have feebly attempted to uphold the [Santo Domingo] fraud." Similarly, Grant's designs on Samoa in the mid-1870s and Benjamin Harrison's Hawaiian ambitions were thwarted by revived memories of corruption surrounding the Santo Domingo debate. Holbo concluded that the Alaska affair—the first scandal—fed attacks on subsequent expansionist enterprises and stymied further territorial acquisition, until the 1893 Hawaiian Revolution caused a shift in popular opinion regarding expansion.[4]

Finally, the supposed public derision that greeted the Alaska Purchase proved to be only a durable myth; notwithstanding the assumption of Congressional corruption, negative contemporary public opinion of the deal has been greatly exaggerated. In a 1958 article, historian Richard E. Welch, Jr. surveyed a sampling of influential United States newspapers and concluded that a majority of the American press either favored the purchase or remained neutral on the issue. Furthermore, in rebuttal to those critics who maintain that the United States agreed to buy Alaska because of friendship with Russia or because it was an irresistible bargain, Welch quoted a passage from the April 1, 1868, issue of the New York *Times* that reveals an understanding and approval of Seward's motive. According to the article, "The main importance of this acquisition grows out of its bearing upon our future trade with Japan, China, and the other countries of Eastern Asia."[5] The inevitable references to "Seward's Folly" and "Seward's Icebox" that tend to arise in discussions of the Alaska Purchase do not accurately reflect the attitude of press or public in 1867.

Once the purchase was signed, sealed, and secured, Congress then departed from its usual pattern of disposition of new territory and set a precedent for the handling of insular possessions the nation would acquire at the end of the century. The Ordinance of 1787 had established the territorial system whereby newly acquired land remained under the direct control of Congress until such time as it could become a full-fledged state. The system had been deviated from only once before, when the southern portion of the Louisiana Purchase was organized as a District rather than a Territory; however, its status was changed to that of a Terri-

tory within a year. Max Farrand, historian and contemporary of Frederick Jackson Turner, concluded that the nation's territorial system in 1867 entered a new phase. Alaska's remote location and scanty non-Native American population made it unlikely that it would ever be admitted as a state; moreover, unlike other territorial acquisition treaties with France, Spain, and Mexico, the treaty with Russia for the cession of Alaska made no provision for the eventual statehood of Alaska. In 1867, Alaska was designated a district, defined by Farrand as "a part of the public domain (or property of the United States) to which representative institutions are not accorded and which there is no intention of incorporating as a state into the Union, or at least no immediate probability that it will be so incorporated." Alaska was, to that date, the "sole exception" to the United States system of incorporating and developing its new lands.[6] Congress' unprecedented treatment of remote, non-contiguous Alaska set a pattern for its later handling of insular possessions that were acquired as a result of conquest and that were not expected to advance to the status of statehood.

Furthermore, Secretary of State William H. Seward, who negotiated the Alaska Purchase, recommended that the District of Alaska be temporarily placed under the jurisdiction of the United States Army. Martial law was not formally declared; however, the army commanders were, in effect, the sole arbiters of justice and order in Alaska. Alaska remained under military rule until 1877; the withdrawal of the United States Army from Alaska coincided with the need for additional troops in the Indian Wars. The Army welcomed an excuse to abandon its responsibility, and its departure left the federal customs collector as the highest ranking government official in Alaska. In an incident that should have embarrassed the federal government, the citizens of Sitka pleaded for help from a British warship during an Indian disturbance that threatened to escalate.[7] Alaska's experience of military occupation and oversight by a government that possessed little understanding of or concern for the citizens of newly occupied territory would later be shared by other territories acquired as a result of United States imperialistic efforts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Although Seward assumed that existing United States law concerning "dependent nations" applied to Alaska, Congress made no provisions for the administration of Indian affairs in its newly acquired territory. United States District Court Judge Matthew Deady of Portland held jurisdiction over Alaska until 1884; he singlehandedly determined the legal status of Alaska Natives. Meanwhile, Congress declined to establish a Bureau of Indian Affairs presence in Alaska or to appoint an agent to over-

Sheldon Jackson in 1899. Photograph courtesy of the Alaska State Library, Photograph by Frank LaRoche, Sheldon Jackson-1 Alaska State Library Photograph Collection.

see Native American affairs in the District of Alaska. The job of acculturating the Alaska Natives fell to a zealous Presbyterian missionary, Sheldon Jackson, who was appointed General Agent of Education for Alaska in 1885, and assumed responsibility for administration of federal education funds for Alaska Native children. The missionary teachers he appointed, however, "appear to have been less concerned with precise doctrinal instruction than with communicating the basics of sanitation, the English tongue, and smoothing the native adjustment to the white man's society."[8] The Christian missionaries' assumption of the racial inferiority of Native Americans in Alaska, as in the rest of the United States, often resulted in a cultural imperialism that was also evident in the United States treatment of the citizens of Puerto Rico and the Philippines at the end of the century.

Sheldon Jackson's government-sanctioned actions in Alaska reinforce historian Joseph Fry's assertion that the issue of race was central to the United States imperial ideology. The nation's nineteenth-century treatment of Native Americans, Fry maintains, was a harbinger of 1890s imperialism. Fry notes legal historian John Wunder's observation that the "old colonialism" of the United States prompted it to acquire Indian lands and confine the Native people to reservations, while the "new colonialism" sought to assimilate the Natives by means of attacking every aspect of the Natives' own culture. Fry asserts that this transition occurred in the 1870s, a time when the United States discontinued its practice of making treaties with Native Americans and instead began to deal with them through the legislative process.[9]

Fry's contention gains support from Sidney Harring's conclusions about the distinct nineteenth century history of Alaska Natives. Harring, a lawyer and historian who specializes in Native American issues, points out that the federal government made no treaties with Alaska Natives, nor did nineteenth century federal Indian law apply to them. Furthermore, Alaska Natives did not enjoy tribal status nor were they considered dependent wards of the federal government. In the nineteenth century, Harring maintains, Alaska Natives and Alaska whites lived under the same law.[10] The federal government's neglect of Alaska Natives and sponsorship of their cultural suppression by Christian missionaries helped to lay the groundwork for similar late nineteenth century actions in other far flung United States possessions.

Although William H. Seward left a sparse verbal record (either spoken or written) of his motives for the acquisition of or intentions for Alaska, statements made by his supporters and surrogates provide ample support for a contention that the Alaska Purchase was an act of imperialism, and its goal was commercial and military dominance. In his Senate speech in support of ratification of the Alaska Purchase treaty, Charles Sumner pointed out that the treaty would extend the nation's commercial base to Japan and China, and he further assured his listeners that the "general welfare" would benefit from the economic advantage that was certain to accrue to the United States' Pacific coast. He clearly pointed to the future economic and military role of Alaska when he stated that the czar of Russia sought to provide the United

Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts argued that Alaska's Purchase would play a role in America's expanding economic empire. Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division. (3b46057u)

States with the means to give England "a maritime rival destined to humble her pride." Furthermore, Sumner linked the United States' acquisition of Alaska to the actions of imperialist Europe. He reminded his audience that France had annexed Algeria, and Spain had less successfully also cast her gaze to Africa. Russia, Sumner told his listeners, expanded south toward India, while England continued to add provinces in India to her empire. Sumner's speech, which was successful in achieving Senate ratification, suggested alluring possibilities for the future of Alaska as a base for United States empire.[11]

Others echoed Sumner's confidence in the future military and strategic advantages that Alaska would supply to the nation. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* opined on April 1, 1867 that "[Alaska] might become very useful to any power having naval interests in the Pacific. . . . A time may come when the possession of this territory will give us the command over the Pacific, which our extensive possessions there require." On July 2, 1868, Robert J. Walker said in a letter to Seward that the Pacific would be the scene of the United States' greatest triumphs, and that those triumphs would result in "political and commercial control of the world." Ernest Paolino, a Seward biographer, observes that Walker's language and sentiment is "almost pure Seward."[12]

Historians who have examined the evidence agree that Seward believed that the true basis of empire would be the United States commercial dominance of the world's markets, and Alaska represented a means to that end. Paolino stated that Seward's goal "was not territorial hegemony in the western hemisphere, but global commercial supremacy." Reginald Stuart holds that with the acquisition of Alaska Seward and other like-minded expansionists acquired the first way station to a Pacific basin trading empire and a commercial route to China, the "holy grail" of global economic superiority. Seward planned that the empire would begin with Alaska, where the Aleutian Islands formed a bridge across the top of the Pacific between North America and Asia. Lafeber writes that Seward foresaw that Alaska would serve as the United States power base on the American continent and provide protection for the northern edge of the Asian market. Seward believed that from Alaska, the route to Asia would move methodically along stepping stones in the Pacific until reaching its goal. The eminent historian of United States foreign policy, William Appleman Williams, maintained that Seward's careful and comprehensive plan "confounds the view that America had world power 'thrust upon it' by external force of circumstance." Alaska historian Stephen Haycox quoted Seward's dictum that "commerce is the god of boundaries," and observed that Seward's vision of Alaska's des-

tiny was so broad, "it barely seemed to include Alaska at all." Lafeber pointed out that Seward had signaled the United States' intentions to claim the Pacific basin and that his purchase of Alaska in 1867 presaged the acquisition of Hawaii and the Philippines at the end of the century. And Paolino concluded that Seward was not a creature of the old manifest destiny school. He was an imperialist, and United States foreign policy from the 1860s to the 1890s reveals the continuation of Seward's policies and plans. But Seward did not leave analysis of his expansion activities to future historians; he unabashedly proclaimed his own geo-economic premise: "The nation that draws the most materials from the earth, fabricates the most, and sells the most of its products and fabrics to foreign nations, must be, and will be, the great power of the earth."[13]

Although the achievement of Seward's vision of a United States commercial empire lost some of its momentum in the years after his death in 1872, expansionism returned in force at the end of the century. By embracing extra-continental expansion, the United States demonstrated its endorsement of Seward's vision of progress and prosperity. Following his example, the nation acquired colonies and protectorates that were far removed from the country's mainland and that brought the nation ever closer to the markets of Asia.

Addressing the class of 1914 at the University of Washington, Frederick Jackson Turner noted the nation's recent expansion to include insular possessions. He mentioned the imperative to civilize these new lands, but went on to discuss a different motivation for continuing to move toward the west: "The dreams of [Thomas Hart] Benton and of Seward of a regenerated Orient, when the long march of westward civilization should complete its circle, seem almost to be in process of realization. The age of the Pacific begins, mysterious and unfathomable in its meaning for our own future." Turner then called attention to the distant land that he had failed to mention in his famous frontier thesis of 1893, the starting point for Seward's march to China. "Already Alaska beckons on the north," Turner mused, "and pointing to her wealth of natural resources asks the nation on what new terms the new century will deal with her."[14] By linking Alaska with Seward's dreams of Asia, Turner called to mind not the pioneer agrarian movement of the nineteenth century with its aim for the triumph of civilization over savagery, but rather the twentieth century's quest for endless production of goods and multiplying markets in which to sell them. The timing of the nation's acquisition of Alaska, the uniqueness of its treatment as the first non-contiguous national territory, and its place as Seward's starting point for a great commercial empire makes the acquisition of Alaska the bridge that connects the nation's nineteenth century dream of conquest of a continent and its twentieth century vision of global economic dominance.

Notes

1. Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1962), 1. Jeannette Nichols offers a useful definition of imperialism, noting that compilers of the *Oxford English Dictionary* decided in 1883 that a definition required both political and economic wording: "In the United States imperialism is similarly applied to the new policy of extending the rule of the American people over foreign countries, and of acquiring and holding distant dependencies in the way in which colonies and dependencies are held by European States." Jeannette Nichols, "The United States Congress and Imperialism, 1861-1897," *Journal of Economic History* 21 (December 1961), 526.

2. Walter Lafeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963), 1, 16. Lafeber references Edmund Burke's definition of empire as "the aggregate of many states under one common head, whether this head be a monarch or a presiding republic." While the Civil War may have temporarily slowed the nation's rate of growth, the conflict also had a positive effect on expansion by removing the contentious issue of slavery as a factor in future debate over new territory.

3. Pitman B. Potter, "The Nature of American Territorial Expansion," *American Journal of International Law* 15, no. 2 (April 1921): 195.

4. Paul S. Holbo, *Tarnished Expansion: The Alaska Scandal, the Press, and Congress, 1867-1871* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983), 21, 88-89, 92, 100.

5. Richard A. Welch, Jr., "American Public Opinion and the Purchase of Russian America," *American Slavic and East European Review* 17:4 (December 1958): 487, 492-493. Welch points out that Seward arranged for information favorable to the purchase to be sent to influential members of the press. Included in this "education campaign" were copies of letters written to Seward by supporters of the purchase, copies of Senator Charles Sumner's eloquent speech in support of ratification of the treaty, and copies of various official scientific reports. Welch maintains that the "education campaign's" effect on the press has been overstated by historians, and that Seward's action does not lead to an assumption that he either controlled or bribed the press (Welch, "American Public Opinion and the Purchase of Russian America," 482).

6. Max Farrand, "Territory and District," *American Historical* Review (July 1900): 678-80; Henry W. Clark, *History of Alaska* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1930), 84.

7. Stephen Haycox, *Alaska: An American Colony* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), 174, 183-84. Haycox bases his conclusion about the Army's readiness to leave Alaska on its negative attitude toward Alaska Natives. The Army viewed the Alaskan Indians as members of a culture inferior to that of whites, and, consequently, U.S. troops enforced American law "essentially without regard to Indian culture, Indian experience, or Indian dignity." (Haycox, *Alaska: An American Colony*, 179.)

8. Sidney L. Harring, *Crow Dog's Case: American Indian Sovereignty, Tribal Law, and United States Law in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 249; Ted C. Hinckley, "The Presbyterian Leadership in Pioneer Alaska," *The Journal of American History* 52, no. 4 (March 1966): 747.

9. Joseph A. Fry, "Phases of Empire: Late Nineteenth-Century U.S. Foreign Relations," in *The Gilded Age: Perspectives on the Origins of Modern America*, ed. Charles W. Calhoun (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007), 313-14.
10. Harring, *Crow Dog's Case*, 207.
11. *Speech of Honorable Charles Sumner of Massachusetts on the Cession of Russian America to the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Globe Office, 1867), 7, 12-13.
12. Welch, "American Public Opinion and the Purchase of Russian America,", 489; Ernest N. Paolino, *The Foundations of the American Empire: William H. Seward and United States Foreign Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), 114.
13. Paolino, *Foundations of the American Empire*, 24, 211; Reginald C. Stuart, *United States Expansionism and British North America, 1775-1871* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 219; Lafeber, *The New Empire*, 26; William Appleman Williams, *The Contours of American History* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1966), 319; Haycox, *Alaska: An American Colony*, 170-71; Lafeber, *The New Empire*, 408; Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansionism and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 61.
14. Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, 296-97.

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