

History

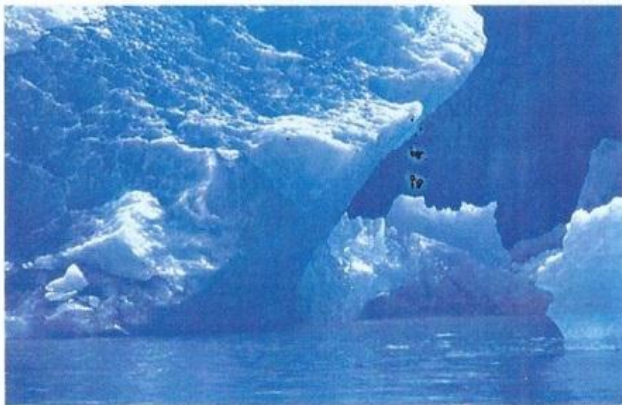
Alaska

The one hundred years between "Seward's Folly" (1867) and statehood (1959) comprise an intriguing though often ignored narrative about the importance of the "great land" to United States history.

The following brief history of Alaska statehood considers the region in the political and imaginative contexts of (contiguous) United States history and emphasizes certain themes revealed in this effort.

First, throughout the late-19th and early 20th century, Alaska serves as an advertisement for American colonialism. A colonial economy developed in which much of the territory's natural wealth (minerals, furs, salmon, timber) was extracted from the region and used elsewhere for the profit of absentee business interests.

Second, Alaska served as an extension of the American frontier, a "great northern and western citadel," in the words of one observer. This notion received a new resonance in the Cold War Years when Alaska represented the edge of American interests menaced by the Soviet Union.



A third theme, which may be surprising to some readers, is Alaska's centrality in numerous national political disputes. The Ballinger-Pinchot affair of 1910--covered in more detail below--fractured the Republican party and had far-reaching consequences for the political course of the U. S. Discriminatory national legislation such as the Jones and White Acts demonstrated the extent of U. S. imperial control over the region.

And the machinations of the conservative coalition of Taft Republicans and "Dixiecrats" during the Eisenhower years delayed Alaska statehood in the interest of maintaining a tenuous Republican majority in Congress.

Finally, the issue of self-determination is at the heart of the issue of statehood. The early federal denial of self-rule and the practice of taxation without representation in Congress should be familiar echoes of the injustice suffered by colonists' of the prior century.

The eventual response to these policies is a stirring chapter in the history of concerted democratic effort: the populist vigor of the Constitutional Convention and the adoption of the aggressive "Tennessee Plan" for statehood combine with national efforts from individuals like Bob Bartlett and Ernest Gruening to achieve statehood for Alaska.

Map of Alaska

