

# THE U.S. MILITARY AS GEOGRAPHICAL AGENT: THE CASE OF COLD WAR ALASKA\*

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**ABSTRACT.** Alaska was strategically key to the U.S. defense plan during the cold war (1946–1989). As such, it was the scene of an enormous and sustained military investment, the effect of which was amplified by Alaska’s undiversified economy, sparse development, small resident population, and marginalized political status at the beginning of the era. The strong military presence affected Alaskan demographics, economic development, and infrastructure and figured prominently in the admission of Alaska to the union in 1959. The high profile and long-term presence of the U.S. military had such a dramatic affect on the course of Alaska that the result was tantamount to a “militarized landscape.” *Keywords:* Alaska, cold war, historical development, militarized landscape.

At the beginning of World War II, Alaska’s mostly primary-sector economy shifted dramatically when the territory was catapulted to strategic importance in the Pacific theater as both an air-corridor connection to the Soviet Union, then a U.S. ally, and key terrain that needed to be kept out of Japanese hands. Defense expenditures in Alaska totaled more than \$1 billion between 1941 and 1945 (USARAL 1969). At the end of the war, defense spending pushed Alaska into a period of uncertainty. Alaskans had little confidence that the main prewar extractive industries, especially mineral mining, would recover in time to prevent economic malaise and massive out-migration (Whitehead 1998). Forestry, fishing, and mining had been shut down during World War II, from the diversion of male labor, interruption of normal trade and manufacturing patterns, and, in the case of gold mining—a significant part of the mining industry at the time—the War Production Board order that closed down all gold-mining operations in the country.

But the enormous military undertakings in Alaska during the cold war ensured Alaska’s future and set the stage for statehood, which otherwise would likely not have occurred until the discovery of oil on the North Slope in 1968. According to the Alaska historians Claus Naske and Herman Slotnick, “the Cold War rescued Alaska from economic depression and obscurity” (1987, 131). The buildup was conditioned by the quickly changing international security picture, the national strategies that addressed it, and rapid technological changes. It brought immediate and enormous transformation to Alaska in many tangible and intangible ways. In terms of construction and infrastructure expansion, the military investment peaked early in the cold war, during what one observer dubbed “the frantic fifties” (Woodman 1999, 109). This discussion focuses on the U.S. military’s role as a powerful geographical agent between 1945 and 1959, the year of Alaska’s entry into the union as

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