

A
Reader's Digest

REPRINT

The Day of the Arctic Has Come

"The eyes of the world are turning north.
We must start using our Arctic resources—including
natural beauty and fossil fuel—right now"

BY WALTER J. HICKEL
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UP HERE in my office in Anchorage, I sit 90 minutes flying time east of Soviet territory and 90 minutes south of our rich North Slope oil fields, and I wish there was some way I could make the rest of America grasp the urgent importance to our nation of Alaska and this whole top of the world.

It is a vast, forbidding territory as mysterious as the moon, yet under its cover of ice and snow lies a unique opportunity for the future.

Take a good look at a schoolroom globe. Look down at the Arctic—ten million square miles, extending roughly from the 60th parallel up and across the North Pole. Within it lie most of Alaska, almost half of Canada, all of Greenland and Ice-

land, parts of Scandinavia, an incredible sweep of northern Russia and Siberia, plus most of their continental shelves and islands. In area, it's as big as Western Europe, the continental United States, Japan, India and China combined—nations which support two billion people. The Arctic, just as big, is practically unpeopled, and all but unknown.

Now, focus in on Alaska. Note that the shortest air route from New York to Tokyo, or to Peking, is not through Honolulu but along the Great Circle route through Alaska. Note, too, how the Pacific coasts of North America and Asia stretch south like legs of a wishbone, and how Alaska sits there strategically, atop the entire Pacific basin.

More than this, Alaska is a treas-

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ure-house of natural beauty and fossil fuel—fuel that lies undeveloped and unused, at a time when we desperately need it to produce energy to run our country.

How much fuel? Nobody knows. Some 30 billion barrels of oil have already been located on the North Slope—enough to supply the “lower 48” with two million barrels a day, from now until the year 2000. And that’s not all. Estimates of other Alaska oil reserves, both on- and offshore, add another 20-30 billion barrels. And if you count potential continental-shelf reserves out to a depth of 200 meters, the total swells unbelievably, by another 600-780 billion barrels. To top all this, Alaska’s coal reserves may exceed 120 billion tons, and natural-gas reserves are estimated at 238-438 trillion cubic feet.

Thus, Alaska is 1) geographically a crossroads of the globe, 2) a place of incalculable economic potential. In world politics, these two things add up to tremendous clout. But the northern regions of Russia, Siberia and Canada share similar strategic locations and the same rich potential. This is why the whole Arctic is destined to become a dominant force in the economic-political balance of the world. This is why I believe the world’s power center is destined to shift from the Middle East to the Arctic.

What should we Americans be doing about it right now? I am convinced that we should get on with the job of extracting North Slope

oil, so that we can reduce our dependence on Venezuela and the Middle East, and start damming up the critical and unnecessary flow of American dollars abroad.

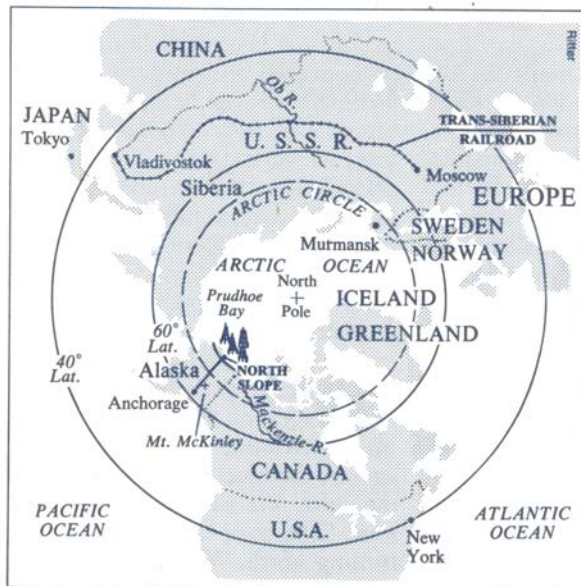
As living space for man, the Arctic will never compete with the softer climates; no one is going to buy a retirement home on Prudhoe Bay. That is why the Arctic is a perfect location for a storehouse of wealth. And what a storehouse, for everything from mineral resources to the rarer resources of natural beauty and wildlife—perhaps most precious of all, in the long run. They will refresh the spirit of man as long as he inhabits earth.

The unique Arctic conditions encourage two opposite points of view. One says: “Exploit it fast. Get in—grab—and get out.” The other warns: “The Arctic is a precious wilderness, so delicate and fragile we should lock it up. Man should stay out forever.”

Both viewpoints are wrong. Today we can get the oil out—and the gas, the iron and the copper—without seriously disrupting the environment. We know better now than simply to take over the engineering techniques that worked in Texas and Oklahoma. We have learned to work *with* the Arctic elements, rather than against them.

This is something the Russians have learned, too. It began when they built the Trans-Siberian railroad in the 1890s, across 5500 miles of blizzard-swept desolation—“rusty streaks of iron through the vastness

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of nothing to the extremities of nowhere," as detractors scoffed. Then, recognizing potential in the region, Lenin in 1921 set up an institute to study the waters north of Siberia, the "Northeast Passage" between the Atlantic and the Pacific.

Fearful of depending on other nations, Soviet leaders were determined to find and develop raw materials within their own borders. As a result, new cities have materialized in the Soviet Arctic and sub-Arctic at fantastic speeds, and established ones have grown. Novosibirsk, on the River Ob in Siberia, now has a population of 1.1 million.

Today, oil-production plans for western Siberia stagger the mind: two million barrels a day by 1975,

and double that by 1980, or some 40 percent of the U.S.S.R.'s total. Overall, including offshore areas, the Soviet Arctic may contain nearly a half-trillion barrels of oil, or almost as much as the "proved" reserves (540 billion barrels) of the rest of the world. Even more overwhelming are the Soviet Arctic's natural-gas reserves, estimated in 1970 at 425 trillion cubic feet (15 trillion more than ours at that time).

The Russians have laid down some 18,000 miles of oil pipelines plus 39,000 miles of gas pipelines, and will soon begin piping gas—probably to Austria and West Germany this year, Italy next year, and later Belgium. Before long, we may even be depending on Russia to ease *our* energy crisis. For example, under Soviet study now is the feasibility of constructing two 56-inch pipelines, one to carry western Siberian natural gas northwest to Murmansk for tanker shipment to our East Coast, the other to convey eastern Siberian gas southeast to a port near Vladivostok for shipment to our West Coast. Their combined length: 4000 miles—five times that

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of our proposed trans-Alaska oil pipeline.*

Understandably, the Russians now say, "There is no Russia without Siberia." They have turned a corner in their attitude toward the Arctic. It is time for us to do the same. The Arctic is not as difficult as it is different. Our challenge is to appreciate that difference. Let's stop being afraid of the Arctic. Let's roll up our sleeves and get started.

We need, for example, information about the continental shelf and the offshore lands of the Arctic. We need up-to-date polar maps. We need answers to questions about international sovereignty over Arctic waters and their seabeds. We ought to know more about Arctic transportation and communications systems, about the problems of large human settlements in the far north. We need a comprehensive study, leading to a coordinated national policy for Arctic development.

It is a responsibility we share with all the nations that rim the Arctic Ocean: the Soviet Union, the Scandinavian countries and, closest of all, Canada, on whose Mackenzie River delta and Arctic islands oil and natural gas have recently been dis-

covered in enormous quantities. The region can become a hostile arena of economic and possibly military conflict. Or it can become a shining example of how nations can plan, live and work together, intelligently and wisely, with love for their planet Earth. We must join other Arctic nations in a federated approach to our common problems and opportunities. We owe it to future generations of the whole world.

As much as we have yet to learn, one thing is clear to me here in Anchorage—as clear as the peak of Mt. McKinley, 20,300 feet high against the blue Alaskan sky across the inlet. We need to move *right now*. The eyes of the world are turning north. We must start using our Arctic resources, those of natural beauty and those that meet man's other needs. And we must take the first steps, whatever our government and Congress judge them to be, toward cooperative international development of the whole polar region.

I have dreamed of the day when Americans would change their attitude toward Alaska and the Arctic. It begins to look as though history, economics and world politics are with me, and as though the day has begun.

*See "The Great Alaska Pipeline Controversy," The Reader's Digest, November '72.