17

Earthquake

Late on March 27, 1964, Gloria and I were cleaning up after a dinner party at our house in Chevy Chase when the phone rang. Our dinner guests, listening to the radio on their way home, had heard a report of a massive earthquake in Alaska. It struck at 5:36 p.m. Alaska time, 10:36 p.m. Washington time, and lasted more than five minutes.

We rushed to turn on the radio. I spent the night listening to the news. Communications from Alaska were down. Some few reports that managed to make it across the airwaves were apocalyptic. Anchorage had been "flattened" or "swallowed up." My mind kept going to our house on F Street, rented out to tenants found for us by Cliff Groh. A huge beam supporting the main open part of the house ran directly over the dining table. I couldn't help imagining it falling on a family sitting down to their Friday evening dinner.

After unsuccessfully trying to sleep, I called Bob Bartlett at home in the early morning. His wife, Vide, said he had already gone to his senate office. I went to meet him there. People had congregated in the outer office. We shared our feelings and waited for Bob to emerge from the inner office. When he came out he said, "Vic, we're getting ready to fly to Alaska. Do you want to come with us?"

I had an hour to get home and pack proper clothes for Alaska. I woke Bob Weaver when I called and told him I was going off with Senator Bartlett. Knowing my weakness for Alaska, he said, "OK. Just don't promise them anything!"

At Andrews Air Force Base, our party had grown, adding Senator Gruening, several administration officials and military brass, reporters, and a couple of

network TV news crews. We strapped into the tightly packed, rear-facing canvas seats of a windowless KC-135 tanker jet and heard the plane begin to roar. Then it stopped. After a short wait, another try, and another. Then air force personnel put us off the plane. Mechanical problems canceled the flight.

Walking back to the terminal with Bartlett and Ed McDermott, director of the White House Office of Emergency Planning (today's FEMA), we noticed Air Force One on the tarmac. McDermott approached the pilot and asked if he would fly us to Alaska. The plane had just returned from taking the president to Texas for the weekend. The pilot said the plane would need fuel and food, and he would need President Johnson's permission. But a flight to Alaska would be fine with him.

McDermott called Johnson, who agreed to lend the plane on condition he would be picked up in time to get back to Washington on Monday. In the terminal, air force officers sorted us out according to protocol, and I learned that my high civil service rating was equivalent to a general.

The ride to Alaska combined extreme luxury with extreme worry. I was with McDermott, Bartlett, Gruening, and the head of the Alaska command in the sumptuous president's quarters in the rear of the plane. An air force sergeant in full dress uniform came around to ask our preferences of gourmet meals. Staff manned a bank of advanced communications equipment, bringing in frequent updates from Alaska. One report said that seen from Elmendorf Air Force Base, downtown Anchorage was a "sea of flames."

When I could not keep my eyes open any longer, I took a nap in the presidential compartment that had been used by Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson. The plane was the same Boeing 707 on which Johnson had taken the oath of office after Kennedy's death four months earlier.

As we neared Anchorage late Saturday afternoon, the only signs of the earthquake on the wilderness below were the cracks of shattered lake ice, which showed dark across the snowy, flat surfaces. The second-largest earthquake ever recorded had shifted and tipped a region measuring 600 miles by 250 miles, but that movement of the landscape was so huge we couldn't see it, even from an overflying jet.

With relief we saw that Anchorage had neither been completely flattened nor swept by large fires. Major slides sliced away parts of the downtown area and demolished some major buildings there, and the area of the well-to-do Turnagain neighborhood nearest the water had been transformed into a chaotic jumble of cracks and chunks, with houses upended, crushed, and sunk. A school in Government Hill had fallen into a hole, and there were various other signs of damage.

We took in the view from the windows of Air Force One on a low flyover, but the pilot announced he would abort a second run after receiving a radio call that the vibrations from the plane were creating a danger of bringing down damaged buildings. Instead, we landed at Elmendorf, and the VIPs and media were ushered into a military briefing. The military was playing a critical part in responding to the emergency.

Burke Riley met me at the plane. He had become the Alaska coordinator for the Department of the Interior, the top civilian federal official in the state. We skipped out on the military briefing and slipped away to get a look at the town. At the public safety building at Sixth Avenue and C Street—which contained the police and fire departments—we found a meeting of all the local officials dealing with the earthquake emergency. I knew most of them. A friendly shout went up from the police chief: "Vic, I knew you would be here!"

Since leaving for Harvard, I hadn't set foot back in Alaska—a period approaching three years—although I talked about returning so much that I had developed a strong reputation for it among my colleagues in Washington. Now, coming back in the midst of a disaster, I feared I would find grief and devastation. Instead, the mood was energized and elevated. Survivors felt an adrenaline high and knew they were living through days they would never forget.

Here was the spirit, once again, that I had missed after the success of the statehood fight. Everyone dove enthusiastically into the work of disaster response and, later, recovery and rebuilding. Alaskans showed their best when facing a challenge. They pulled together magnificently, dealing with one problem after another in a situation in which most normal civil functions of the region had been disabled or destroyed.

Anchorage was black. Phones and utilities in parts of the city were out. One hospital was structurally unsound, and staff had to evacuate patients to the other hospital, which lacked clean water. But it had an emergency generator, so people congregated there to get away from the dark and cold.

Houses destroyed or uninhabitable numbered in the hundreds. Rail and highway links between towns and out of Alaska were gone. The control tower at the airport had collapsed. Television, newspaper, and radio outlets were incapacitated.

Alaskans solved each problem, one by one, in rapid succession. A typically heroic effort was contributed by Genie Chance, then a KENI radio station reporter. When the quake hit, she was on her way downtown. She drove directly to the Public Safety Building. Other radio station employees had gone to the transmitter to get the station back on the air. Genie called them on her car radio, and they put her on the air. Her voice, and her judgment, brought the

news and a sense of calm to the city from her car and later from a phone inside the police department.

Many others similarly responded by finding whatever they could do to help. Ham radio operators worked around the clock to relay messages to the outside world. Military personnel delivered water, served meals, set up generators, and made flights to assess damage. Volunteers were deputized to protect damaged buildings and keep the peace (no looting or disorder occurred). Service clubs and the Salvation Army set up shelters and accounted for missing people. Neighbors whose houses were intact invited in the newly homeless.

On that Saturday evening, the day after the quake, I walked from the Public Safety Building to our house on F Street, hoping to settle my worry over our tenants. I found the blinds drawn and the family huddled inside, physically unharmed but terror-stricken by the continuing aftershocks. The house that I had built was completely undamaged. I went next door to check on the Crittendens and then walked a dozen blocks to the Trycks' house to visit and get some sleep.

I rose at about 5 a.m. on Sunday morning, Easter, to see more of the city. A patrol car enforcing the curfew stopped me almost as soon as I started walking, and the officer asked what I was doing out on the street. I explained that I had come from Washington to survey results of the quake. A sergeant in the passenger seat said, "Aren't you Vic Fischer?" They offered to take me around to see the damage.

We covered downtown, where a theater and businesses on the main street, Fourth Avenue, had disappeared below street level. On Government Hill we saw the destroyed elementary school and other wreckage. We climbed amid the chaos of wrecked homes in the upscale Turnagain area. On the Park Strip, the floors of an apartment building that had been under construction had pancaked down to the ground, one on top of the other; fortunately, the workers had gone for the day.

An area of more than twenty blocks on the west end of town broke away from the rest of downtown and slid laterally westward, leaving a gap of between five and twenty feet. While streets and utilities along this gap were destroyed, miraculously, most apartments and homes in the area that moved remained undamaged.

Later, I rejoined our Washington group for a flight to see tsunami damage in Seward, Valdez, and Kodiak. Seward had been swept by a tsunami wave; ruptured fuel tanks burned and much of the Alaska Railroad yard was wiped out. A wave demolished the waterfront in Valdez. In Kodiak, the tsunami had lifted fishing boats from the harbor and cast them around the downtown area, vessels battering down buildings. All the cities had lost their docks.

One hundred and fifteen Alaskans died in the earthquake, as well as sixteen people in Oregon and California. Most were killed by the waves. We could scarcely believe the relatively low casualty numbers when looking at the severity of the devastation. The largest loss of life was in Valdez, the closest town to the earthquake epicenter. Townspeople had been sitting on the dock and along the bank watching the unloading of a cargo ship. When the quake hit, the ground disappeared from under them into the sea, and massive waves followed. Thirty-one people, mostly children, were lost. The Native villages of Chenega and Afognak were completely destroyed by the tsunami.

Generally, Alaska's thin population meant hardly anyone lived in most of the heavily shaken region. Luck helped, too, as our flexible, low-rise wooden buildings were well suited to withstand shaking, and the earthquake came late on the afternoon of Good Friday, when schools and downtown areas were quiet.

But the quake did overwhelming damage to infrastructure, public buildings, businesses, and housing. Without massive intervention, the area would not survive economically. It was clear that we needed to rebuild on a huge scale, far beyond what the affected communities and the state could afford, and we had to do it quickly, before residents were forced to leave to find jobs and housing elsewhere.

Air Force One carried us back to Washington on Sunday night, arriving very early Monday. After spending a few hours in bed, I was awakened by a phone call from Bob Weaver, my boss. He would pick me up in his limousine in ten minutes to go to the White House, where the president wanted to meet with all of his cabinet secretaries for reports on handling earthquake relief and reconstruction. I was dressed by the time he arrived and managed to give Weaver a report in the car on the situation in Alaska.

The president was first shown amazingly detailed photos of the destruction in Alaska taken by U-2 spy planes, followed by a preliminary analysis of the earthquake and tsunamis by the US Geological Survey. The various cabinet secretaries then reported to the president, in the order of when their agencies were created, on what assistance they could provide Alaska.

Our agency, HHFA, was second to last. But thanks to my trip, Weaver was able to shine, with the latest on-scene information and steps already taken to activate our housing and lending branches to provide immediate help. And he announced then and there that he had appointed me as the HHFA coordinator of Alaska recovery and reconstruction operations, both in Alaska and in Washington.

Johnson's response to the disaster was brilliant. He was in the midst of the fight for the Civil Rights Act, the escalation of the Vietnam War, and the approaching presidential election that fall. But he recognized the importance of the earthquake and the opportunity to show the effectiveness of the federal government through energetic coordination from the top. He gave the cabinet marching orders to get involved personally and in concert, to throw everything at the problem and to get the job done without delay.

Johnson didn't wait for paperwork or process. He declared a federal disaster the day after the quake, as soon as he heard from Governor Egan. Freed of usual bureaucratic requirements by the emergency and by the president's directive, agencies that I was accustomed to seeing move at a glacial pace suddenly became nimble and powerfully effective.

The Army Corps of Engineers stood out. At normal times it would grind through endless procedures at an inexorable and unalterably gradual speed. I had many friends there. They normally lacked the ability to do anything quickly. Now the corps' officers seemed to bring their enormous capabilities to bear at a moment's notice. They dispatched heavy equipment to deal with broken roads or utilities on a word and issued contracts for work in a flash, as expeditiously and effectively as the most aggressive of private entrepreneurs.

For two years, we had labored futilely to create a joint state–federal economic development and planning commission for Alaska. Barriers appeared on the state's side, then on the federal side, then back on the state's side. The carefully negotiated presidential executive order to create the commission seemed to have died, lying dormant in the president's and governor's offices. But within days after the earthquake, the White House picked up the document, adapted it, and changed the name to the Federal Reconstruction and Development Planning Commission for Alaska, and the president signed it.

The commission became the critical nexus of coordination for the federal response that President Johnson wanted but could not personally oversee. The order appointed the heads of the relevant departments as commission members, including Weaver. For chairman, Johnson picked Senator Clinton Anderson of New Mexico, his close friend and a tough, well-respected legislator who would be able to get needed legislation through Congress. For his executive director, Senator Anderson chose Dwight Ink, an Atomic Energy Commission administrator, who proved to be a gifted manager of the many moving parts.

Within thirty-six hours of the White House meeting, I was back in Alaska. Before leaving Washington, I met with our top people in community facilities, public housing, housing finance, planning and urban renewal, and other programs, to ask what help they could render Alaska in both the short and long terms. Our agency could not provide immediate disaster assistance, which

could best be handled by the Army Corps of Engineers, Red Cross, and such. We would focus on restoring communities and giving financial help to those whose homes and businesses were lost or damaged.

For the next four-plus months, I labored endless hours to coordinate our various programs, commuting between Alaska and Washington. I worked with state and local officials to figure out how we could assist them. I informed the regional and field staffs of our constituent agencies of the high priority the president and Weaver had set for getting Alaska back in shape. And in DC, I was involved in relief legislation, budgets, and more coordination.

Communities returned to basic functioning relatively quickly, but huge issues kept developing. We knew the earth had moved, but not how much. The quake had caused a massive chunk of the earth's crust to shift laterally and to seesaw, with the Kenai Peninsula sinking and eastern Prince William Sound rising. Everyone waited nervously to see how high the big tides of April would roll into towns such as Portage, Hope, Seldovia, and Homer—for only at high tide would we know how much of the town would survive.

The earthquake also had exposed our lack of knowledge about the stability of soils in southcentral Alaska. No one had expected Turnagain to liquefy or Fourth Avenue, the main street in downtown Anchorage, to sink. Before we could rebuild, we would need scientific and engineering investigations of what lay under these communities, and how we could make new buildings safer.

Federal officials would have to decide whether and to what extent towns should be rebuilt; how to handle the finances of hundreds of families whose homes had been destroyed, usually with mortgages still owing; and whether to rebuild the federally owned Alaska Railroad at all, a bad investment financially but a critical part of the state's economy. Likewise, coastal towns could not get back on their feet without rapid reconstruction of port facilities used by the fishing industry.

It took time for people to adjust mentally as well. The prevailing emotions were of optimism and energy, but fear lay just below the surface, as I found out exactly a week after the earthquake at lunch in the Westward Hotel, one of Anchorage's tallest buildings.

The restaurant was packed full of people, many of whom I knew. I sat at a big round table with, among others, Lidia Selkregg, a geologist and fellow progressive involved in local issues. The place had reopened for the first time since the quake, and it was like a big, impromptu celebration for the renewal of normal life.

Earthquake survivors traded stories that day, as they would do for years to come. Bob Atwood's log house had stood at water's edge in Turnagain and had been among the first to tumble down in the slide. Like everyone else in the

neighborhood, Bob grabbed what he could and ran—in this case, his trumpet. He fell, and his trumpet and hand went into a crack in the earth that closed around them. To survive, he let go of the trumpet and ran on.

Bob Reeve's birthday party had been in progress on the afternoon of the quake on the top floor of the hotel where we were now dining. The building had swung fifteen feet, slamming the adjacent, eight-story hotel structure. People fled down blacked-out stairwells as the building whipped back and forth. The survival of the hotel had remained in doubt for days as the hill it stood on kept sliding by inches.

At lunch that Friday, I became aware of a sound akin to a New York subway train approaching the hotel underground. A few seconds later, the shock hit hard. Another earthquake. I had been through lots of earthquakes but hadn't lived through the big one. I just sat still and waited, with uncertainty rather than fear my strongest emotion.

But for most others, the raw terror of a week earlier returned. The room exploded into panic. Someone shouted, "Go, go, go... Get out!" and people stampeded for the doors. Selkregg shouted, "No, stay where you are," knowing that was safest. The shaking stopped without anyone being hurt. It had been the strongest aftershock from the quake. For me, it was a window on the psychic impact of what had happened.

I knew many of the people we were trying to help. On my frequent trips to earthquake-impacted cities for public meetings, I always saw old friends. I had worked with their local officials on projects in my earlier jobs. The meetings made clear that, of the many challenges we faced, financing of the rebuilding process would be among our most difficult. The Federal Housing Administration, which set me up in an office in the Federal Building, was already talking to the banks about the complex issue of mortgage relief for homeowners of damaged housing.

Federal agencies worked hard to help. For the most part, they only needed to be asked to set aside their regulations and work quickly. Procedures were cut to a fraction of their usual length. But sometimes I ran into resistance.

A career regional official in San Francisco was dragging his feet and wouldn't waive the rules. At my request, he came to Anchorage to explain his resistance. He pointed out that his boss in Washington and I were political appointees and that we would be long gone when federal investigators came around later and held him responsible for any problems that arose from shortcutting the established procedures. Sympathizing with his concern, I contacted his boss. With a direct written order from the commissioner, he had the cover he wanted and was most cooperative thereafter.

As I managed the process, I became the Alaska ambassador to the federal government that Bob Bartlett had suggested I could be when he convinced me to take the HHFA job. I had to explain Alaska prices to Senator Anderson, who as the president's surrogate frequently questioned cost estimates for reconstruction in Alaska. All prices were higher in Alaska, and construction costs were radically higher, a point I made more than once in testimony to the Federal Reconstruction Commission.

What to do about Valdez was one of the big issues before us. The quake had not only taken the two docks and destroyed many buildings and oil tanks, but the ground had subsided. During high tide, much of the town was flooded. When I visited, I had to wear rubber boots to get to Bill Egan's grocery store on the main street.

Mayor John Kelsey, whose dock company had lost all its facilities, drove me several miles to a site on solid ground with an excellent port location. As a planner, I immediately saw this as the perfect site for relocating Valdez.

Dwight Ink, the top federal coordinator, spent a lot of time in Alaska, too. In an essay about that time, he described an early trip he made with Governor Egan to Valdez in April, flying into the airport in a snowstorm without lights, amid the mountains of the fjord where the town lies. Alaska National Guard Major General Thomas Carroll was on board. After leaving the passengers, the general ordered the plane to depart again without turning off its engines to avoid becoming snowbound in Valdez, as it was needed to continue carrying rescue supplies. The plane crashed minutes later, killing all on board.

In spite of the tragedy, Ink was able to pull together the city council for a meeting and ask them for a decision on whether to move Valdez to a new site. Geologists had officially determined that the old location was unsuitable because of poor soils and was too vulnerable to future tsunamis. In light of the risk, Ink said the commission would not pay to rebuild there. Discussion lasted all night and into the morning. Finally, with Ink's assurance that the federal government would pay the cost, the townspeople voted to move Valdez four miles away to higher ground.

Ink's problem was that the federal government had little history of paying for reconstruction of private facilities after a disaster. I argued repeatedly that urban renewal was the only federal program that would work with both the old and the new Valdez townsites.

Existing urban renewal law would allow for buying up properties in the existing city; acquiring land for a new town; installing the roads, utilities, and other infrastructure; and disposing of the improved land for private development and public facilities. The law could be similarly used to deal with damaged land and property in other cities hit by the earthquake.

In Alaska, the redevelopment process could proceed expeditiously because the Alaska State Housing Authority, where I had worked for years, was the sole urban renewal agency for all cities (unlike other states, where each city dealt directly with the federal government). ASHA had ten years of experience working on this program with HHFA, the federal funding agency. I knew most of the staff, and our agencies meshed well.

As a side benefit, the program could help make Alaskans financially whole. We could buy their damaged property based on values prior to the earthquake.

Ink initially rejected using urban renewal because of how long it could take. The legal and regulatory complexity of these projects meant they sometimes required a legendary amount of time to complete, often extending across a decade or more. But as we worked through the issues, Ink and the commission came to understand that urban renewal was the key to building a new town for Valdez and for other recovery projects. There simply was no other federal program that could do the job.

Along the way, I had to explain to the parsimonious Senator Anderson why, as part of the Valdez relocation, we needed to buy and demolish perfectly good buildings in the old Valdez townsite. Otherwise, some residents and businesses would not move, and the new Valdez would lack a critical mass to become viable.

The urban renewal program did have one complicating aspect. Local communities had to contribute a significant portion of the cost. Alaska couldn't afford to pay much. I asked the commission to increase the federal share of urban renewal costs, even if that meant reducing the overall size of the program. Initially, Senator Anderson believed a reduced local match would encourage wasteful projects, but in later earthquake recovery legislation, he and the commission raised the federal share to 75 percent.

In the end, Alaska's Senator Gruening made a floor amendment increasing the federal share to almost 95 percent, a great help for cities in need of reconstruction. In passing that bill, Congress also provided $80.5 million for Alaska assistance, including $25 million in additional funds for urban renewal and $25 million for capital improvements. These were substantial sums in those days, sufficient for the tasks at hand.

Congress also created a program to help ruined homeowners with their mortgages. It was an alternative to the slow process of urban renewal. But the mortgage program required new laws and regulations, which inevitably led to litigation. That took years. Urban renewal won the race, getting compensation for property owners and rebuilding relatively rapidly.

With high-level effort focused on the problem, we made urban renewal work at light speed. The initial stage, of reaching state and federal decisions on a redevelopment plan, took two months rather than the normal two to three

years. Subsequent stages were similarly compressed in time. It was clear that the bureaucrats responsible for the programs had never wanted to be slow or inefficient—it was the federal rules to prevent fraud and the complexity of land transfers that usually slowed them down. Freed of restrictions and in the urgency of the moment, action came fast and money transfers moved quickly.

All in all, the response to the 1964 earthquake was outstanding. The response was immediate and relief came quickly, with services restored with minimal delay. The federal government took on major relief and reconstruction responsibilities and discharged them in a more effective manner than in any disaster before or since.

Not everything, of course, turns out quite as well as one might have hoped.

A lot of wonderful development plans were dreamed up for Alaska's devastated towns. Some of the nation's top architects and planners looked at the problems, rapidly creating town layouts to take advantage of the clearing of old buildings to make better communities. My friends were in the middle of this work, including Ed Crittenden, whose firm came up with a great plan for Anchorage's downtown area. However, city bankers and town fathers preferred a property-by-property approach, so creative opportunities were often lost.

Other plans ran into the twin barriers of Senator Anderson's frugality and the conservatism of small-town city councils and businessmen. Some projects simply were abandoned due to cost. Others amounted to lost opportunities, amended through local politics in ways that led to poor results, as in Kodiak and Seldovia, which lost significant parts of their communities' unique character.

In Valdez, good ideas were poorly carried out. The design of the new town of Valdez used some good contemporary planning concepts but did not adequately take into account winter conditions, particularly the enormous snowfalls in the area. The town was too spread out, lacking appropriate housing density and concentration of businesses.

We never imagined at the time that Alaskans would forget the terror of the earthquake and begin building in the most hazardous areas. Yet that happened before the final reports about the disaster had even been printed. Especially in Anchorage, city fathers simply ignored the risks, allowing construction along the L Street slide and in Turnagain that puts lives at risk when the next major earthquake comes.

In part, the success of the rebuilding allowed Alaskans to forget the earthquake. In less than a decade, Valdez became the southern terminus of the trans-Alaska oil pipeline. Kodiak grew to be one of the nation's largest fishing ports. In Seward, the site of massive destruction was turned into land and businesses for a thriving tourism industry. Through urban renewal, Anchorage's downtown was stabilized by a buttress area of about five square blocks that allowed low-rise

construction on the north side of Fourth Avenue and provided extensive land for downtown off-street parking, parts of which are used for fairs and weekend markets. And so it went with other towns.

Most of that happened after I had moved back to my regular, metropolitan development work. I had spent less than five months as HHFA's earthquake coordinator, but it was a tremendously intensive period, an experience that was a major element in my professional career.

The work involved everything from broad policymaking down to the most practical details, from negotiating federal legislation to dealing with the problems of individuals and businesses. It honed my entrepreneurial and negotiating skills, my ability to come up with ideas, and my knack for bringing people together to make plans. And it further reinforced my feeling of self-confidence, always critical to my future endeavors.

For our family, the earthquake had the effect of calling us back to Alaska. Returning reminded us of how long we had been gone. When school let out in Washington in early summer 1964, Gloria and the three kids joined me in Anchorage. Our fearful renters having returned to Texas, we moved into our old house, the one we had built.

We rejoiced being back among our old friends and neighbors. Alaska artist Alex Combs made a painting of our family astride a merry-go-round horse. He brought the canvas, the paint still wet, to a party at the Crittendens' to celebrate our wedding anniversary.

Late that summer I wrote to my father:

> It truly is great being home. We are in our own house, which is infinitely more "us" than anything in Washington could be. Kids truly enjoying selves; Glo too, limitlessly. No one wants to return, but that we will. While parting will be hard, we do know for sure that future is in Alaska, only question when.

In the meantime, I was off to the opposite end of the earth. Literally.