



Roman S. Czarny¹

**THE BEST DEAL EVER? A BRIEF HISTORY OF ALASKA'S PURCHASE
OR HOW THE US HAS BECOME AN ARCTIC COUNTRY
(150TH ANNIVERSARY)**

Abstract

The Arctic plays a very important role in the world today, be it for climatic reasons or the promise of unspeakable riches in the future or new maritime routes. And the whole world is interested in the Arctic as evidenced by the participation of major global players in everything related to that region. Therefore, there is a strong supposition that the Arctic countries will have a major role to play in the international arena in the upcoming years. On the 150th anniversary of the famous “deal”, this article presents how the United States became an Arctic country.

On March 30, 1867, the United States reached an agreement to purchase Alaska from Russia for a price of \$7.2 million which means that the year 2017 marks 150th anniversary of the “best deal ever”. Much has been written on the subject and the opinions regarding the purchase seem to differ to this very day quite dramatically. Naturally, in retrospect, everyone appears to have a 20/20 vision on the subject but the truth is that we will never be able to assess what would, could or might have been, had it not been done. Was it really the best deal ever or a complete disaster? One could easily ask questions whether the Treaty between the U.S. and Russia was profitable and beneficial from a purely business-oriented point of view and if it has actually paid for itself from the time of contracting the deal till today. When describing the transaction, the work will also present some Polish myths about the involvement, if not the instrumental role, of Poles in the whole venture. The aim of this article is to present the background of the purchase and varying opinions about the deal as well as some economic, political and security aspects of it, drawing from the American and Polish sources on the subject.

Key words

Alaska, the Arctic, economy, security, politics.

¹ Roman S. Czarny, Ph.D., Jan Kochanowski University.

Introduction

The Arctic plays a very important role in the world today, be it for climatic reasons or the promise of unspeakable riches in the future or new maritime routes. And the whole world is interested in the Arctic as evidenced by the participation of major global players in everything related to that region. Therefore, there is a strong supposition that the Arctic countries will have a major role to play in the international arena in the upcoming years. On the 150th anniversary of the famous “deal,” this article presents how the United States became an Arctic country.

Not too many Americans realize that, by virtue of Alaska, the United States is indeed an Arctic country. What is even more surprising, not too many seem to care. Geography, as in every country, may not be the strongest suit of the education system. The story is that an applicant from Central/Eastern Europe goes to a job interview at which he is asked to name the four closest countries bordering with the United States. The first two are, naturally, obvious. The third one takes him a while, but he rightly names Cuba. The fourth one is the trickiest, so he gives it a moment and then correctly says it is Russia by virtue of Alaska. According to the interviewers, 95% of the interviewees did not get it right. The applicant’s “guess” was attributed to the country of his origin on the Vistula River and considered lucky. The point? May the Reader draw his/her own conclusion.

The island of Big Diomedede is in Russian territory, and not far away is Little Diomedede, which is part of the United States. At their closest points, the two islands are about 3.8 km (2.4 mi) apart². If one could handle the cold water, one could possibly swim from the States to Russia!

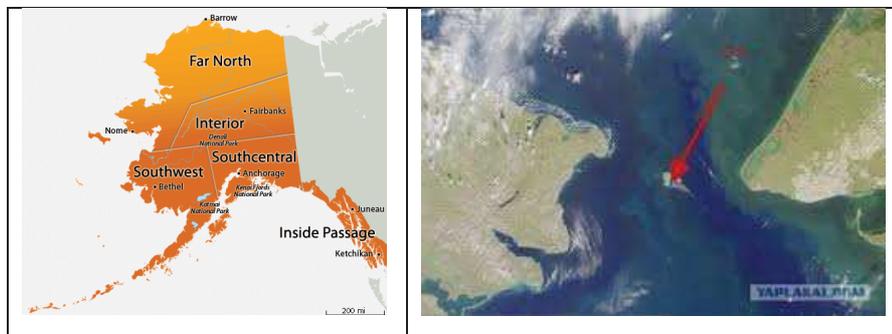


Figure 1. Picture on the left-hand side: The United States and Alaska (in red). The satellite picture on the right presents the Bering Strait (international waters) separating Russia and the United States: the arrow points to the Russian Big Diomedede; very close to it, the American Little Diomedede is situated.

Source (from the left): https://www.revolvy.com/main/index.php?s=Purchase%20of%20Alaska&item_type=topic&sr=100 and <http://www.yaplakal.com/>

² Quora, [online:] <https://www.quora.com/How-far-is-Russia-from-the-United-States>, (04.07.2017).

How it happened

On March 30, 1867, the United States reached an agreement to purchase Alaska from Russia for a price of \$7.2 million which means that the year 2017 marks 150 years after the “best deal ever”. The deal was ratified by the Senate on April 9, 1867, by a vote of 37 to 2, and then the House approved the appropriation of money to purchase Alaska on July 14, 1868 by a vote of 113 to 43. Much has been written on the subject and the opinions regarding the purchase seem to differ to this very day. Naturally, in retrospect, everyone appears to have a 20/20 vision on the subject but the truth is that we will never be able to assess what would, could or might have been, had it not been done. Was it really the best deal ever or just mere folly? One could easily ask questions whether the Treaty between the U.S. and Russia was profitable and beneficial from a purely business-oriented point of view and if it actually paid for itself from the time of contracting the deal till today. When describing the deal, the work will also present some Polish myths about the involvement, if not the instrumental role, of Poles in the whole venture. The aim of this article is to present the background of the purchase and varying opinions about the deal as well as economic, political and security aspects of it, drawing from the American and Polish sources on the subject.

To show the both sides of the deal, perhaps it would be necessary to present also the Tsar’s ratification of the measure³. One might find it interesting that the document is written in the Cyrillic, French (left-hand side of the page, and English – right-hand side of the page)⁴.

Interestingly enough, the Treaty concerning the cession of Russian possessions in North America, as presented by the library of Congress, was also written in two languages, English in the left-hand side columns, and French in the right-hand side column. In seven articles, the Treaty specifies in detail the territory and the price to be paid “within ten months after the exchange of the ratifications of this convention, to the diplomatic representative or other agent of His Majesty the Emperor of all the Russias, duly authorized to receive the same, seven million two hundred thousand dollars in gold”⁵.

Why?

As usual, there exist many theories of why the deal was made. One could go back in history as far as the Little Ice Age⁶ and that would possibly explain why the

³ *Preamble to the Treaty and the appropriation of money by the Fortieth Congress*, The Library of Congress, Virtual Programs and Services, Digital Reference Section, [online:] <https://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/ourdocs/Alaska.html>, (04.06.2017).

⁴ *The first page of Tsar Alexander II’s ratification of the treaty*, Продажа Аляски, tr. Prodzazha Alyaski, [online:] https://www.revolvy.com/main/index.php?s=Purchase%20of%20Alaska&item_type=topic&sr=100, (04.06.2017).

⁵ *Treaty with Russia*, 30.03.1867, The Library of Congress, A Century of Lawmaking for A New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, p. 1774-1875; [online:] <https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llsl&fileName=015/llsl015.db&recNum=576>, (30.06.2017).

⁶ As usual, there is no agreement as to the time when the Little Ice Age actually started and ended. For the purpose of this work, it is enough to say that no matter when it began and who is right, the period

Russians took over Siberia and the lands in North America searching for profits from the then much lucrative fur trade as the prices for warm clothing skyrocketed throughout Europe. One should also mention the much profitable logging (in the today's states of Washington, Oregon, and California), and the Russian lust for new lands, which began in the 16th century, together with expansionism common practically in every time, that brought Russia to Alaska and eventually California which was not different from American territorial expansionism that resulted in the purchase of Louisiana, annexation of California and Texas⁷. Not too many people seem to know that even today in California there exist traces of the former Russian presence; in 1812, the Russians established their outpost of Fort Ross near Bodega Bay in Northern California, north of San Francisco Bay. The Fort Ross colony included a sealing station on the Farallon Islands off San Francisco. Today, there exists a waterway called "the Russian River" which was originally known among the Southern Pomo as Ashokawna (ʔaʃ:oʔkʰawna), "east water place" or "water to the east". The earliest European name for the river, Slavyanka, appears on a Russian-American Company chart dated 1817. "The river takes its current name from Russian Ivan Kuskov of the Russian-American Company, who explored the river in the early 19th century and established the Fort Ross colony 10 mi (16 km) northwest of its mouth. The Russians called it the Slavyanka River, meaning «Slav River»"⁸. Colonizing new territories has always been a favourite occupation of the white race, regardless of who lived there.

Some scholars list also other reasons for the expansion, namely that the Russian advances were also fueled by a desire to make the the Russian Orthodox Christian faith available to the "heathen" populations in the east and to add new taxpayers and resources to the empire⁹. And, again, there is nothing better than explain or substantiate greed than by a "noble" desire to spread and propagate the one and only true faith which means that the early Russian settlers were, in equal measure, setting up the trading posts and the Russian Orthodox churches. This time, such an approach is not typical of the white race exclusively. "Hal Spackman, the executive director of the Sitka History Museum in Alaska, said the Russian legacy could still be seen in people's surnames, the names of geographical features, and the endurance of the

ended by the late 19th century or early 20th century while it started at the time sufficient to cover the period under investigation.

⁷ Benjamin Franklin wrote that "the Prince that acquires new Territory ... removes the Natives to give his own People Room ... may be properly called [Father] of [his] Nation". B. Franklin, *Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind, Peopling of Countries*, [online:] <http://www.columbia.edu/~lmg21/ash3002y/earlyac99/documents/observations.html>, (01.09.2017). The list of American territorial acquisitions in the 19th century alone includes: Louisiana Purchase (1803), Red River (1818), East Florida (1819), West Florida (1821), Texas (1845), Oregon Territory (1846), Mexican Cession (1846-48), Gadsden Purchase (1853), Alaska (1867), Puerto Rico, Guam, the Philippines (1898) and Cuba (a protectorate), Wake Island (1899), American Samoa (1899).

⁸ E. G. Gudde, W. Bright, *California Place Names: The Origin and Etymology of Current Geographical Names*, University of California Press, Berkeley, California 2004, p. 323.

⁹ W. L. Iggiagruk Hensley, *Russia gave up Alaska. Why?*, "Alaska Dispatch News", April 1, 2017, [online:] <https://www.adn.com/opinions/2017/04/01/russia-gave-up-alaska-why/>, (04.06.2017).

Russian Orthodox faith”¹⁰. One more reason, on the Russian side, to sell Alaska was the fear that the Empire would not be able to hold on to the American territories, having lost the Crimean War to Britain (1850s), and that the British would simply seize Alaska, the Tsar made the decision to at least salvage some money out of the necessary deal since the Russians would not be able to hold on to this territory as “the population of nearby British Columbia started to increase rapidly a few years after hostilities ended, with a large gold rush there prompting the creation of a British crown colony on the mainland in addition to the one that was already established on Vancouver Island, where the French and British fleets had retreated after the Battle of Petropavlovsk in the Russian Far East”¹¹. “From the Russian point of view, the deal made a lot of sense”, said Susan Smith-Peter, a historian at the College of Staten Island in New York. They could irritate Britain, and they could have a closer relationship with the United States”¹². The matter was pressed by the younger brother of the Emperor, Grand Duke Konstantin. In a memorandum to Foreign Minister Alexander Gorchakov he stated that “we must not deceive ourselves and must foresee that the United States, aiming constantly to round out their possessions and desiring to dominate undividedly the whole of North America will take the afore-mentioned colonies from us and we shall not be able to regain them”¹³. Additionally, the Russian Crown sought to repay money to its landowners after its emancipation reform of 1861 and borrowed 15 million pounds sterling from Rothschilds at 5% annually¹⁴. When the time came to repay the loan, the Russian government was short of funds. It is also worthy of note that at the time Russia and America were both interested in weakening the British (Russia because of the Crimean War and the United States for a variety of reasons) and while Britain and Canada supported the Confederation in the Civil War, Russia stood staunchly behind the Union, so perhaps some political sentiments played some role in the deal.

As for the American side, “the United States also thought the purchase would position it closer to trade with China, and fend off any British thoughts of encroachment on the West Coast, said Gwenn A. Miller, a historian at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass. “It was really about Manifest Destiny”, she said, “about expanding the U.S.”¹⁵. In the 1840s, the United States had also gone through its period of expansionism: American interests in Oregon, the previously-mentioned annexation of Texas, a war with Mexico and acquisition of California.

Afterward, Secretary of State Seward wrote in March 1848: “Our population is destined to roll resistless waves to the ice barriers of the north, and to encounter

¹⁰ E. Gershkovich, *150 Years After Sale of Alaska, Some Russians Have Second Thoughts*, March 30, 2017, [online:] <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/30/world/europe/alaska-russia-sale-150.html>, (20.06.2017).

¹¹ W. L. Iggiagruk Hensley, op. cit.

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ [online:] https://www.revolvy.com/main/index.php?s=Purchase%20of%20Alaska&item_type=topic&sr=100, (20.05.2017).

¹⁴ *Кто и как продавал Аляску (Who and how sold Alaska)*, [online:] <http://www.opoccuu.com/300312.htm>, (11.09.2012).

¹⁵ *Russian Opinion on the Cession of Alaska*, “The American Historical Review”, 48, No. 3 (1943), p. 521–531.

oriental civilization on the shores of the Pacific”¹⁶. So Seward was already thinking about the Arctic and pushed to accomplish the goal. “In Alaska, the Americans foresaw a potential for gold, fur and fisheries, as well as more trade with China and Japan. The Americans worried that England might try to establish a presence in the territory, and the acquisition of Alaska – it was believed – would help the U.S. become a Pacific power. And overall the government was in an expansionist mode backed by the then-popular idea of «manifest destiny». So a deal with incalculable geopolitical consequences was struck, and the Americans seemed to get quite a bargain for their \$7.2 million”¹⁷.

In purely territorial terms, the U.S. gained some 370 million acres of, according to some – pristine wilderness, and as argued by others, of snow and ice – almost a third the size of the European Union. Obviously, there is more to the story than meets the eye. Although reactions to the purchase in the United States years ago were mostly positive, some opponents called it “Seward’s Folly” or “Seward’s Icebox” (after Secretary of State William H. Seward), while many others praised the move for weakening both the UK and Russia as rivals to American commercial expansion in the Pacific region¹⁸.

In the Alaska purchase, there is an interesting thread regarding the Polish participation in the whole matter and most of it concerns the figure of Włodzimierz Bonawentura Krzyżanowski or Wladimir or Vladimir B. Krzyzanowski. Some Polish sources even claim that Poles were absolutely instrumental in the deal! For example, the portal called niezlomni.com (citing as the source the name of Marek Burzyński and *Gazeta Obywatelska*) sports an interesting title “Why should Americans thank the Poles?”. The text immediately presupposes that Americans should be grateful and that they truly appreciate the fact of owning Alaska, which is not necessarily the case, makes Russians totally and absolutely stupid (again, not true, and definitely not in this case). It further claims that the Russian financial liquidity was severely depleted by the loss of tax revenues due mainly to the Polish January Uprising 1963-64 against the Tsarist rule¹⁹, as Poland was then partitioned (as if there was no Crimean War), and asserts that the Russian negotiating team of Baron Eduard de Stoeckl was composed mostly of Poles (non-existent in American sources), and that the crucial role in the matter was played by W. Krzyzanowski (again, not found in American sources). The text mentions “many Russian sources” without naming at least one.

¹⁶ R. E. Jr. Welch, *American Public Opinion and the Purchase of Russian America*, “American Slavic and East European Review”, No 17 (4), 1958, p. 481–494; H. I. Kushner, *Seward’s Folly’?: American Commerce in Russian America and the Alaska Purchase*, “California Historical Quarterly” 1975, p. 4–26.

¹⁷ W. L. Iggiagruk Hensley, op. cit.

¹⁸ R. Welch, op.cit.; H. Kushner, op.cit.

¹⁹ [online:] <http://niezlomni.com/zakup-alaski-dlaczego-amerykanie-podziekowac-polakom/>, (04.07.2017).



Figure 2. *The signing of the Alaska Treaty of Cession on March 30, 1867.* L–R: Robert S. Chew, William H. Seward, William Hunter, Mr. Bodisco, Eduard de Stoeckl, Charles Sumner and Frederick W. Seward.

Source: [online:] https://www.revolv.com/main/index.php?s=Purchase%20of%20Alaska&item_type=topic&sr=100, (20.05.2017).

Polish traces: myths and legends

The figure of Włodzimierz Bonawentura Krzyżanowski²⁰ is indeed interesting as he clearly has become a myth or a legend both for Poles in the Old Country as well as for Polish-Americans and is frequently referred to as “a forgotten hero”. Undoubtedly a hero who took part in an unsuccessful uprising in partitioned Poland against Prussia, he then distinguished himself in the American Secession War – the sources, both Polish and American, agree on that. However, his involvement or participation in the Alaska deal remains much clouded. The year 2002 marked a notable exchange at the Capital when then the Polish ambassador, when awarding a medal to the Governor Frank Murkowski, made a comment that the governor was not the first one with a name ending in “ski.” Alaska’s first governor, according to the ambassador was the Polish-American hero Włodzimierz Bonawentura Krzyżanowski. Naturally, this caused much controversy and the American historians, especially those specializing in Alaska, started working feverishly to find out where all that came from. Eventually, it was discovered that the story most probably sprang from a bad translation of Krzyżanowski’s memoirs – he was, indeed, a federal official and administrator, remotely connected with Alaska where he uncovered some instances of corruption in Sitka, but had never been officially a governor of Alaska. The lovable and much favorable to the Poles story was born by mistake and later propagated and perpetuated by Polish-American historians, eventually finding its way to Poland where it is still very much alive. The myth has taken hold among Polish-Americans. The Web sites of at least 10 organizations declare Kriz to be the first governor of Alaska. A spokesman for the Polish embassy in Washington said the ambassador’s remarks about Krzyżanowski were drawn from two different Internet sources. “We simply got

²⁰ All the biographical notes solemnly mention that he was a first cousin to Frédéric Chopin, whose mother Justyna Krzyżanowska's brother was Włodzimierz Krzyżanowski's father.

it not correct”, said the spokesman, Artur Michalski. “We fell to the victim of this legend”²¹.

Legends die hard or hardly ever die. G. Janiszewski writes in “Polska Zbrojna” on June 21, 2016 in his article about honoring the memory of General Krzyżanowski in Poland by a ceremony and a memorial plaque that “after the war, he negotiated the Alaska purchase from the Tsarist government which eventually was a stab in the back of the Russian imperial designs and constituted a true gold mine for the United States²²”. So the myth lives on and seems to be doing very well.

Pros and cons of the purchase or gains versus losses

Naturally, as everything else, such a deal must have its enthusiasts and staunch opponents. The opponents from years ago are the ones that coined “Seward’s folly”, “Seward’s icebox,” and President Andrew Johnson’s “polar bear garden”, while some senators called it the procurement “reckless and wasteful”. The proponents call the purchase the deal of all times and praise Alaska’s beauty and natural resources to no end. Clearly, to nobody’s surprise, the matter has two sides. The Alaska purchase and the validity of it can be analyzed from several points of view, but here are a few examples of the conflicting American opinions:

“Cash! Cash! Cash! Cash paid for cast off territory. Best price given for old colonies North and South. Any impoverished monarchs retiring from the colonization business may find a good purchaser by addressing William H. Seward, Post Office”.

Washington D.C. New York Herald Tribune, April 12, 1867, p. 5.

“The possession of this Russian territory can give us neither honor, wealth nor power, but will always be a source of weakness and expense, without any adequate return”.

Congressman Cadwallader Colden Washburn (R-Wis.) *Congressional Record*, 1867.

“The United States has already gotten back 425 times over the \$7 million purchase price it paid to imperial Russia, in metals, minerals, timber and oil”.

Congressman Joe Evins (D-Tenn.) *Congressional Record*, 1958.

“Seward, however, was wiser than his critics realized. Alaska paid for itself many times over with the gold that was discovered in the Yukon Valley, and its rich copper and oil resources, as well as seal and whale trade”.

Gary Nash, *American Odyssey*, New York: McGraw Hill, 2004, p. 221. High school history textbook²³.

One could analyze the Alaska purchase from many varying points of view. The financial aspect of it, naturally, comes to the front and should be examined first.

²¹ L. Ruskin, *Anchorage Daily News*, HEADLINE: Barking up the wrong Pole: Hero wasn’t governor, Web sites’ misinformation perpetuates Krzyżanowski myth, [online:] <http://www.arlingtoncelemetry.net/wbkrzyzanowski.htm>, 20.12.2002, (04.07.2017).

²² G. Janiszewski, *Polska Zbrojna*, <http://www.polska-zbrojna.pl/home/articleshow/19791?t=Upamietniono-gen-Wlodzimierza-Krzyzanowskiego>, 21.06.2016, (15.08.2017).

²³ All excerpts taken from D. Barker, *Was the Alaska Purchase a Good Deal?* University of Iowa, 2009, p. 1.

Financial losses/gains

The land added 586,412 square miles (1,518,800 km²) of new territory to the United States. Advocates of the purchase immediately claim that the prize was a mere \$7.2 million (\$123? million today), or about 2 cents per acre (\$4.74/km²). The quoted figures are constantly questioned and challenged, but 2 cents an acre does seem to be a bargain. Some scholars claim that Alaska was clearly overpriced and that the real value of it at the time should have stayed at about 5 million, which was the initial offer. “Senator Gwin tendered a hypothetical offer of five million dollars for the Russian colony, a figure Gorchakov found far too low. De Stoeckl informed Appleton and Gwin of this, the latter saying that his Congressional colleagues in Oregon and California would support a larger figure”²⁴. Several sources suggest that some of the money never made it to the Russian coffers and was used to bribe American Senators to approve the price²⁵.

Those in favor of the purchase say that the deal has paid for itself many times over. “Hundreds of billions of dollars in whale oil, fur, copper, gold, timber, fish, platinum, zinc, lead and petroleum have been produced in Alaska over the years – allowing the state to do without a sales or income tax and give every resident an annual stipend. Alaska still likely has billions of barrels of oil reserves”²⁶. The gold discovered in the Yukon Valley alone during the Gold Rush was worth billions and it must be noted that the state mines gold to this day.

Naturally, there are many schools of thought on the matter and several methods of calculating the gains and losses. Economist David Barker from the University of Iowa claims that after adjusting for the relative size of the national economy, then and now, the price tag in today’s dollars would be the staggering 16.5 billion. As always, for every argument there is a countereargument. Many scholars simply question the method of calculation used by Barker²⁷. The very beginnings of American interests in Alaska were not connected with exploiting the natural resources of the area but definitively with a greater scheme, that is with expanding the American economy. According to Stephen Haycox, William Henry Seward, an expansionist just like many of his American expansionists before him, to name only Thomas Jefferson and Kohn Quincy Adams, vigorously sought new markets for American products. Seward was of the opinion that the future for American business lay in the East, in Asia²⁸.

Alaska is extremely difficult and very expensive to govern for a variety of reasons. Distances are vast and conditions are difficult. Building reasonable infrastructure has been very tricky and extraordinarily expensive. Ordinary government expenditures, such as the cost of running a territorial legislature, have been much higher in Alaska

²⁴ N. Bolkhovitinov, *The Crimean War and the Emergence of Proposals for the Sale of Russian America, 1853–1861*, “Pacific Historical Review”, 1990, No 59 (1), p. 15–49.

²⁵ D. Barker, op. cit., p. 36; [online:] <http://wiadomosci.onet.pl/kiosk/wielki-przekret-czyli-jak-sprzedano-alaske/phjfp>, 04.08.2008, (12.08.2017).

²⁶ W. L. Iggiagruk Hensley, op. cit.

²⁷ M. Powell, *Was the Alaska Purchase a Good Deal?* “New York Times”, [online:] <https://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/08/20/was-the-alaska-purchase-a-good-deal/?mcubz=0>, 20.08.2010, (04.07.2017).

²⁸ S. Haycox, *Truth and Expectation: Myth in Alaska History*, “Northern Review”, No 6, 1990, p. 65, (31.08.2015).

than elsewhere. Ambitious projects tend to run considerably over budget²⁹. Various experts maintain that Alaska has been receiving more from the federal government than it has ever contributed to the budget as the revenues generated in Alaska stay mostly there. i.e. in the state. One cannot help making a comparison of the situation with Denmark and Greenland³⁰ – what is it going to be: subsidies forever or the future exploitation of the riches? The afore-mentioned Barker, a staunch critic of the financial viability of the Alaska purchase, claims that “If the federal government made a substantial profit from Alaska, as is generally believed, then Alaska would provide a counter-example to this claim. A financial loss for the federal government would support the proposition that Alaska has been dependent on the federal government”³¹. Not that he is alone as there are many critics of the “wasteful spending”, the more so as many Alaskan residents “seem to revile the federal government even as their politicians excel at reeling in and spending its money. Alaska is the top recipient of federal stimulus dollars per capita – with no close second. Alaska, as a new state with vast needs, required ports and airports and highways and so on. But then you must account for the fact that Alaska’s share of federal spending has spiked sharply in the last 15 years”³².

The Polish sources seem all to praise the deal, for whatever reason, with a notable exception of a few voices. The titles of the Internet posts 150 years after the purchase, in translation, leave no doubt as to the assessment of the deal: The worst deal ever or how the Russians sold Alaska to the Americans for a song³³, The worst deal in Russian history – the sale of Alaska in 1867³⁴. The worst deal in history: How the Russians sold Alaska³⁵.

There are also some dissenting voices, mostly based on the attitude and reasoning of the afore-mentioned economist David Barker: The Alaska purchase – the worst deal in America’s history³⁶. The purchase of Alaska by US: The worst investment in the American history³⁷?

So which one was it in reality – the best or the worst? The author will attempt to present some answers in the conclusion.

²⁹ D. Barker, op. cit., p. 20.

³⁰ See: R. M. Czarny. *The High North: Between Geography and Politics*, Springer 2015, p. 120-124.

³¹ D. Barker, op. cit., p. 3.

³² M. Powell, *How Alaska Became a Federal Aid Magnet*, “New York Times”, [online:] <https://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/08/18/how-alaska-became-a-federal-aid-magnet/?mcubz=0>, 1.08.2010, (04.07.2017).

³³ P. Strawiński, [online:] <http://biznes.onet.pl/wiadomosci/swiat/zakup-alaski-przez-usa-historia-sprzedazy-alaski-przez-rosjan/tlv2x5>, 20.03.2017, (25.08.2017).

³⁴ S. Balcerowski, [online:] <https://historia.org.pl/2015/01/14/najgorszy-interes-w-historii-rosji-sprzedaz-alaski-w-1867-r/>, 14.01.2015, (25.08.2017).

³⁵ P. Osiński, [online:] http://superbiz.se.pl/wiadomosci-biz/najgorsza-transakcja-w-historii-jak-rosjanie-sprzedali-alaske_862611.html, 09.07.2016, (25.08.2017).

³⁶ R. Woś, [online:] <http://forsal.pl/artykuly/630947,kupno-alaski-przez-usa-najgorszy-interes-w-historii-ameryki.html>, 06.07.2012, (25.08.2017).

³⁷ A. Smolińska, [online:] <http://www.ticker.pl/2016/08/10/kupno-alaski-przez-usa-najgorsza-inwesycja-w-historii-ameryki/>, 10.08.2016, (25.08.2017).

American security and the Arctic

The geopolitical consequences of the deal are incalculable. Alaska has played a very important role in the Cold War. The state is a key part of the United States defense system, with military bases located in Anchorage and Fairbanks, and it is the country's only connection to the Arctic, which ensures it has a seat at the table as melting glaciers allow the exploration of the region's significant resources.

Alaska plays a vital role in the protection of the United States national security interests in the Arctic region. According to the Department of Defense's (DoD) 2016 Arctic Strategy, the desired goals for the Arctic are as follows: a secure and stable region where U.S. national interests are safeguarded, the U.S. homeland is defended, and nations work cooperatively to address challenges. The two main supporting objectives are³⁸:

- 1) ensure security, support safety, promote defense cooperation; and
- 2) prepare to respond to a wide range of challenges and contingencies – operating in conjunction with like-minded nations when possible and independently if necessary – in order to maintain stability in the region.

The 2016 Arctic Strategy also updates the ways and means DoD intends to use to achieve its objectives as it implements the National Strategy for the Arctic Region. These include: enhancing the capability of the U.S. forces to defend the homeland and exercise sovereignty; strengthening deterrence at home and abroad; strengthening alliances and partnerships; preserving freedom of the seas in the Arctic; engaging public, private, and international partners to improve domain awareness in the Arctic; evolving DoD Arctic infrastructure and capabilities consistent with changing conditions and needs; providing support to civil authorities, as directed; partnering with other departments, agencies, and nations to support human and environmental security; and supporting international institutions that promote regional cooperation and the rule of law³⁹.

Politics

There is no doubt that Alaska does not rank very high on the list of the hottest states in the Union, possibly with the notable exception of the role played by Sarah Palin in the recent years. Ten sitting presidents have visited or at least stopped in Alaska. "John F. Kennedy campaigned in Alaska before his election, saying he was the first candidate for president to do so. «There are three electoral votes in Alaska. I left Washington, D.C., this morning at 8 o'clock. It is now 11:30 in Washington. I have come, I figure, about 3,000 miles per electoral vote, and if I travel 800,000 miles in the next two months, we might win this election. But I am prepared to do it», Kennedy said at the Alaska State Fair in Palmer"⁴⁰. Some notoriety has been registered

³⁸ Department of Defense Report to Congress on Strategy to Protect United States National Security Interests in the Arctic Region, December 2016, p. 2, <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2016-Arctic-Strategy-UNCLAS-cleared-for-release.pdf>, (15.08.2017).

³⁹ Ibidem, p. 2.

⁴⁰ [online:] <https://www.adn.com/we-alaskans/article/presidential-journeys-alaska-and-lesser-moments-history/2015/08/29/>, (02.09.2017).

lately due to the Arctic and the American presidency in the Arctic Council but then the stormy elections have certainly overshadowed it. However, politically speaking, Alaska has always been an important talking point in D.C., be it for federal spending, native inhabitants and their rights, the Arctic matters, oil and oil spills, natural disasters (mostly earthquakes), environment protection, and so on. It is, after all, the biggest state, certainly much different than the lower 48, and an irresistible magnet for some people.

Conclusion

From a purely rational point of view, it seems better to have than not to have, with the exception of diseases. Depending who one talks to, one may come to the conclusion that the Alaska was the grandest feat in American history or the greatest flop. In reality, it was probably both – the rule of two sides is still applicable. From a purely financial point of view, it was rather more of a disaster than a success but one should never forget about things unquantifiable or simply immeasurable. The whole discussion from the point of view of business is somewhat similar to the financial examining of the profitability of raising children, especially the adopted ones. Pecuniary argumentation strongly suggests that it makes no sense whatsoever but does it necessarily mean that one should be guided entirely by money? Neither should one count too much on the future returns in whatever form. As every parent knows, the logical, finance-based attitude should be a definitive no, but then, there are compensations though, admittedly, rather difficult to define in non-emotional and strictly commonsensical categories.

As said before, nearly all people have a 20-20 vision in retrospect. The decisions, however, were made then, in the geopolitical situation of the day, ruled by political attitudes and desires of that time. Hardly any sources mention the fact that the idea behind the purchase of Alaska was also to somehow acquire British Columbia thus making the whole North-West part of US territory. Then the deal would have made much more sense. The British did not budge and neither did the Canadians and so the Union has a state disconnected from its main territory. Not that it is much of a problem – it is not the only one.

Politically and in terms of security, once again, it is better to have options, i.e. to possess the territory. Without Alaska, US would have never been or become an Arctic country, but then, as usual, depending on who is talking, is it a privilege or rather more of a headache? Alaska did play its important role in the Cold War and today it also constitutes a vital bridgehead. However, even at the time of the Cold War, what would have happened if the Soviets actually invaded Alaska? The answer is: they would have reached Canada, not the U.S. It seems that at the present time, the era marked by long-range missiles, Alaska may not be as important a post as it used to be.

Therefore, only time and international developments will tell whether the Alaska purchase was a sound investment, with the necessary squabbles over the definition and actual meaning of the term of “sound investment”, and in the meantime we can enjoy what is left of the pristine environment and the beauty of the landscape, as well as excellent fishing and hunting, providing one is so inclined.

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Streszczenie

Arktyka odgrywa obecnie w świecie niezwykle istotną rolę, by wspomnieć choć względy klimatyczne, obietnicę olbrzymich bogactw surowcowych czy przyszłe nowe szlaki morskie. Cały świat jest zainteresowany Arktyką, czego dowodzi uczestnictwo wszystkich globalnych graczy w sprawach dotyczących tego regionu. Stąd istnieje domniemanie, że kraje arktyczne będą odgrywać kluczową rolę na arenie międzynarodowej w nadchodzących latach. W 150. rocznicę sławnego „interesu wszechczasów” artykuł ten przypomina, jak Stany Zjednoczone stały się krajem arktycznym.

W roku 1867 Stany Zjednoczone doszły do porozumienia z Rosją w sprawie zakupu Alaski za 7,2 miliona dolarów, co oznacza, że upłynęło 150 lat od „interesu wszechczasów”. Temat ten został już po wielokroć opisany, a opinie dotyczące

samego zakupu różnią się dość diametralnie po dzień dzisiejszy. Jak można się spodziewać, z perspektywy czasu każdy wydaje się mieć niezwykle wyostrome spojrzenie na tę kwestię, ale tak naprawdę nigdy się już nie dowiemy, co by się stało i jak by to było, gdyby nie doszło do układu między USA a Rosją. Czy to rzeczywiście najlepszy interes w dziejach czy też prawdziwa katastrofa? Można z łatwością mnożyć pytania, czy „interes” był sensowny z czysto biznesowego punktu widzenia i czy się spłacił do dnia dzisiejszego. Podczas prezentacji „interesu” praca przedstawi także wybrane mity o polskich tropach w przedsięwzięciu, które rzekomo były ważne bądź wręcz instrumentalne w procesie negocjacji i samego zakupu. Celem tego artykułu jest ukazanie tła zakupu, różnorodnych opinii na jego temat, a także aspektów ekonomicznych i politycznych, a także kwestii bezpieczeństwa na bazie źródeł amerykańskich i polskich.

**Interes wszechczasów? Krótka historia zakupu Alaski
albo jak Stany Zjednoczone stały się krajem arktycznym (150. rocznica)**

Słowa kluczowe

Alaska, Arktyka, gospodarka, bezpieczeństwo, polityka.

Roman S. Czarny, assistant professor at the Department of North European Countries at the Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce; specializes in the Arctic issues (U.S.) and public and cultural diplomacy.