

Summary of Dr. Terrence Cole's Presentation

Abolish Southeast Alaska: A Modest Price to Pay for World Peace?

As a terrestrial species we sometimes forget that 70% of the planet is blue. Fishermen, sailors, marine scientists and astronauts know well that the third planet from the sun should be called Ocean instead of Earth, and that the enormity of our ocean frontier is inescapable. For millennia the unimaginably large, dangerous and mysterious waters of the deep were infinity itself, and if there always were more fish in the sea, it was only because there always were more waves beyond the blue horizon.

Since the dawn of history humans by choice and necessity have gravitated towards the ocean shore for sustenance, settlement, communication and transportation. "The sea," eminent French historian Fernand Braudel once wrote about early Europe, "was the gateway to wealth."

So too in Alaska—at least until the advent of Prudhoe Bay—the sea was the source of the territory's greatest treasures, as the value of canned salmon by itself far outweighed all the gold and copper ever dug out of the frozen ground, not to mention the riches from clams, crabs, herring and halibut, fur seals, sea otters, walrus and whales.

Building on this wealth from the sea, the largest and richest settlements in Alaska grew and prospered, particularly in Southeastern Alaska, which until the Second World War was the territory's economic, demographic, and political heartland.

Thus it was all the more striking in 1910 when Robert Stein, an eccentric employee of the U.S. Geological Survey in Washington and a failed polar explorer, sought to rectify what he thought was the greatest geographical mistake in history, the Southeastern Alaska panhandle. Born in Silesia in 1857, Stein greatly admired the Prussian style of Chancellor Bismarck, who had unified Germany with "blood and iron" and created the dominant power of Europe. In a similar fashion Stein was obsessed with creating a more orderly and disciplined world, organized on logical principles—for instance he wanted to rename Hawaii as "Octonesia" to indicate there were seven other islands besides the Big Island itself—but it was his campaign to encourage the United States to give the panhandle to the country to whom it should logically belong, Canada, that was his boldest initiative, and eventually led a sympathetic Congressman from Maryland to introduce a bill in Congress to get rid of the panhandle as Stein wished.

Stein thought the Alaska Panhandle was a crime against geography, a sore in the side of western Canada, a 500-mile long scar on the map of North America, a political absurdity that the 20th century could not afford. He thought giving away the most valuable part of Alaska, including about 18,000 miles of coastline—nearly half of the Alaska total—would not only make the map conform to geographic reality, but it would also be the first building block in an alliance to save the world from chaos and destruction. Stein feared the growing tension after 1904 between his native Germany and the British Empire could lead to a new era of barbarian conquest, the rise of the Yellow hordes of which the Kaiser had warned.

To promote what Stein thought was the common racial and cultural heritage of a unified Anglo-German-American world empire, which would ensure the supremacy of the white race, Southeastern Alaska would have to be eliminated. Stein's logic was that doing away with the panhandle and giving British Columbia its rightful access to the sea would be the perfect magnanimous gesture to not only cement American and British ties, but also help to forge American, British, French and German unity in order to avoid a suicidal conflict among the great powers. Though he never asked anyone in Alaska about his plan, he was sure no one would mind paying such a modest price to save civilization. In his mind Alaska's control of the coast north of 54-40 had been stolen from the British Empire, and the world's greatest naval power would particularly appreciate acquisition of a 500-mile long corridor along the rich waters and lucrative trade routes of the North Pacific.