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## Canadian Arctic Sovereignty and Security: Historical Perspectives

*Edited by P. Whitney Lackenbauer*



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Cover: The Mobile Striking Force, an air-portable and airborne brigade group designed as a quick reaction force for northern operations, was an inexpensive solution to the question of how Canada could deal with an enemy lodgement in the Arctic. During training exercises, army personnel from southern Canada learned how to survive and operate in the north. In this image, taken during Exercise Bulldog II in 1954, Inuk Ranger TooToo from Churchill, Manitoba relays information to army personnel in a Penguin. DND photo PC-7066.

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# Calgary Papers *in Military and Strategic Studies*

## Canadian Arctic Sovereignty and Security Historical Perspectives

Edited by P. Whitney Lackenbauer

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## “The Army of Occupation”: Americans in the Canadian Northwest During World War II

Ken S. Coates and William R. Morrison

War has remarkable capacity to transform, and not only the lives of soldiers and civilians in its path. The most familiar manifestations of its power are the horrifying results of combat: mass death, widespread destruction, and the attending economic and social dislocation. But war brings many other changes, both to vanquished and perhaps less obviously to victor. In the economic realm alone, there is the construction of military facilities that can be adapted for civilian postwar uses, tremendous geographical and industrial shifts in public and private sector investment, population displacement based on new employment opportunities, new gender roles, new purchasing patterns or limitations, and the like.

Gerald Nash, in his path-breaking book *The American West Transformed: The Impact of World War II* (1985), has described how that war brought sweeping changes into hitherto isolated parts of the United States. The most striking example of this process to take place in Canada during World War II occurred in the far northwest of the country. As in the United States, it occurred not through direct military engagement but rather through the economic and social impact of defense construction, specifically through the invasion of the Canadian Northwest by a massive military and civilian “army of occupation.”

The United States had long maintained a watching brief on the Canadian Northwest. Interest in the region, which began with the purchase of Alaska from the Russians in 1867 and peaked during the Klondike gold rush of 1897-1899, was based on the recognition that British Columbia and the Yukon stood astride the logical path of communication between Alaska and the lower 48 states. This recognition, over the years, had stimulated a number of suggestions (most originating in Alaska) for road and railway projects to link Alaska to the south. but the Territory’s small population and the rapid decline of the Yukon stifled southern interest in the region. There had been some renewed activity during the late 1930s as the Canadian government began to build the Northwest Staging Route – a string of airfields from Edmonton, Alberta. to

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Whitehorse and on to Alaska. But few outside the region paid much attention to the vast sub-Arctic expanse that lay to the northwest of the Alberta capital.

This indifference vanished within a few days of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. With frantic demands for protection from the Pacific Coast states pouring into Washington, the American government quickly drew up plans for the defense of Alaska and the northwest flank of the continent, plans that become even more urgent when in 1942 the Japanese actually occupied American soil--the Aleutian islands of Kiska and Attu. Following a brief study and pro forma negotiations with the Canadian government, the United States announced in February 1942 that a road would be built connecting Alaska with the southern highway grid. The route chosen for the road (and there were several hotly competing plans) followed the existing and planned line of airfields from Edmonton to Fairbanks. The Alaska-Canada (ALCAN) or, as it was soon called, the Alaska Highway, became the cornerstone of a massive American effort in the region.

Although it was this highway that received most of the attention during the war and after, the road was only one element in America's plans for the Canadian Northwest. Taking what later proved to be very bad advice, the U.S. government also launched the CANOL Project, a scheme to develop the oil field at Norman Wells on the Mackenzie River in the Northwest Territories and to build a pipeline to carry the oil nearly 600 miles across the Richardson Mountains to a refinery in Whitehorse. From this refinery, which had to be constructed from scratch, shorter pipelines would carry petroleum products along the Alaska Highway and down to the Pacific Coast at Skagway. The American authorities also undertook to expand the Northwest Staging Route into a much larger network, designed (after the summer of 1942) to handle convoys of military planes ferried from American factories to Fairbanks, where they were turned over to Russian pilots for use on the Eastern front. There were a host of ancillary projects, such as a connecting road from the Alaska Highway to tidewater at Haines, Alaska, airfields and docking facilities along the Mackenzie River to supply the CANOL Project, a telephone system for the region, and a myriad of warehouses, dormitories, service facilities, garages, and other such structures. Eventually about 40,000 military and civilian workers would work on these projects.

This was not the first “invasion” of the Canadian Northwest, or even perhaps the most famous. At the end of the last century, the discovery of gold at Rabbit, now Bonanza, Creek near present day Dawson City touched off the great Klondike gold rush. Tens of thousands of prospectors flooded the region, raising its non-native population from zero in 1870 to about

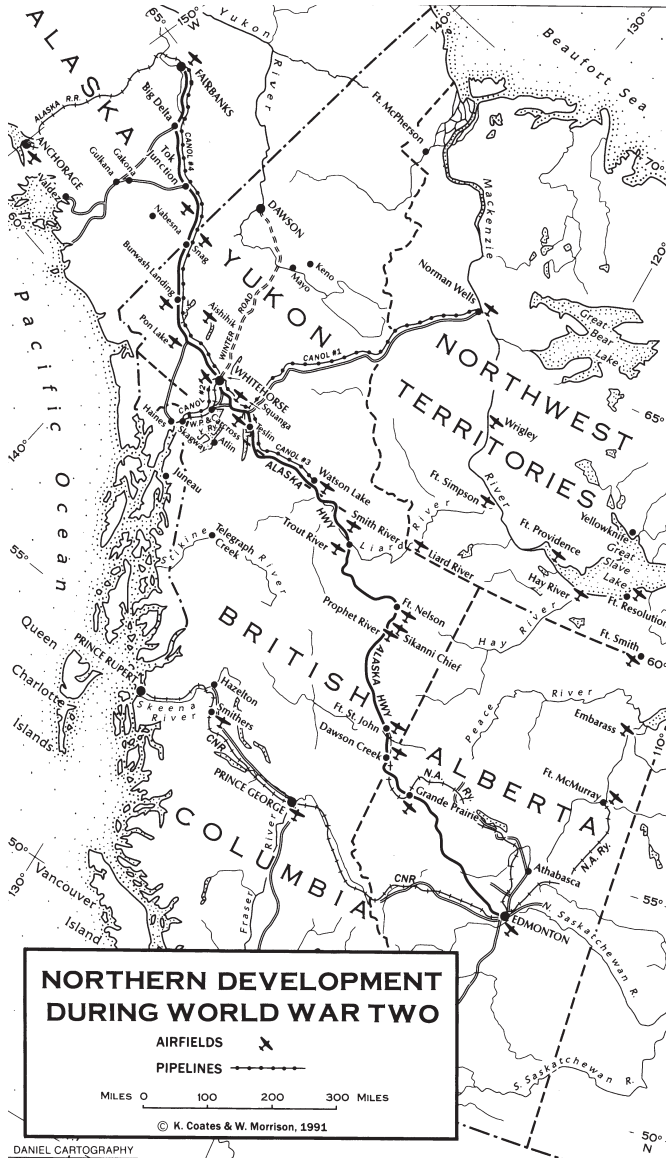
40,000 in 1898. Communities sprang up, and a transportation system was developed with steamboats plying the Yukon River, a railroad running from Whitehorse to Skagway, and another railroad operating for a dozen years between Dawson City and the gold-bearing creeks, a hydroelectric system, and a telegraph line to the outside world – the infrastructure for an industrial-age frontier economy. But the gold-bearing creeks were quickly stripped of their richest deposits, and it soon became uneconomical to work them by hand. By 1900, industrial capital was moving in to replace and displace the individual prospectors of Western legend, and massive dredges were chewing up the creeks where the Klondikers had worked their sluice boxes. The population began to shrink, reaching a low of just over 4,100 (of whom only 2,500 were non-native) by the early 1920s. By the outbreak of World War II, it was still under 5,000, and the region had been all but forgotten with only the popular writings of Robert Service and Jack London sustaining its mythology.

And the Yukon, despite its somnolence, was one of the busier regions in the Canadian Northwest. Northern Alberta and the Mackenzie River Valley had boomed briefly following the discovery of oil at Norman Wells in 1920; but as was all too common in the North the promise of economic development proved false; since there was plenty of oil in southern Alberta and in Texas, it was not economically feasible to bring northern oil to market. Thus, a pipeline to the south was not built for another 60 years. The Peace River country northwest of Edmonton, which had been settled after World War I, had attracted fugitives from the prairie Dust Bowl during the Depression but had not boomed as its promoters had hoped. Edmonton had touted itself as the gateway to the North and had achieved a population on the eve of war of about 90,000; but this was due more to its role as provincial capital than to its northerly location. Northern British Columbia was largely undeveloped. The provincial road system petered out where farmland turned to bush a few miles north of Fort St. John; north of that, the land was still trapping country, where the native people pursued their traditional hunting and gathering way of life.

Much of this was changed by the war and the arrival of the Americans. Within a month of the decision to build the Alaska Highway, engineers and support crews arrived in the region, followed by thousands, then tens of thousands, of military and civilian workers. Almost overnight the isolation and economic depression that had gripped the region were swept away. The first to arrive on the scene were members of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, who had the responsibility for the construction of the initial pioneer road to Alaska and the preliminary work on the CANOL Project. They were soon

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followed by a large group of civilian workers, mostly American but with a good proportion of Canadians, whose job was to bring the Army's rough road up to civilian standards, to complete the pipeline and the refinery, and to finish the other projects in the region.



Map 2. From William R. Morrison and Kenneth A. Coates, *Working the North: Labor and the Northwest Defense Projects 1942-1946* (Anchorage: University of Alaska Press, 1994).



The communities in the path of these projects were almost instantly transformed by them. Whitehorse, a seasonal transportation village that was to become the key regional administrative center for the highway, saw its population grow from less than 800 to more than 10,000 between March and May of 1942. Dawson Creek and Fort Nelson, small villages in northeastern British Columbia, saw their populations double and redouble. Tiny places like Fort Smith, Waterways, Norman Wells, and Watson Lake were transformed from isolated trading posts into important construction depots.

Though some communities mushroomed, at least one withered as a result of the construction projects. Dawson City, then the capital of the Yukon and the Territory's commercial as well as administrative center, was bypassed by the Alaska Highway, which ran more than 300 miles south of it. Except for some Yukon River barges, which went by the town loaded with construction equipment, there was no benefit to Dawson City from the defense projects. In fact, the opposite was true. The relatively high wages paid to the civilian workers on the highway drew workers away from the Klondike mines. Several local businesses – the dry cleaner, the glazier, and others – moved to Whitehorse to share in the prosperity. Whitehorse ended the war with a population of 3,600, while its northern rival had declined from about 1,500 to less than 700. Whitehorse had highway connections to the rest of the continent, while Dawson City was not connected to the Canadian highway system until 1955 (a road from Dawson City west to Alaska was built in 1951). In 1953 the Territorial capital was moved south to the town on the Alaska Highway, while Dawson was barely kept alive by the gold mining industry. It was revived as a tourist destination in the 1960s by large infusions of government money, but its permanent year-round population today is not much more than 1,000, while Whitehorse exceeds 20,000.

Had the Alaska Highway planners chosen a more central route, which many people had recommended and which would have made more economic sense than the present one, the figures today would be reversed. The greatest single change brought about by the Americans was to the town of Whitehorse. As mentioned, the highway eventually made it the new capital of the Yukon, but it was also physically transformed. Into a sleepy village with one cafe, no sewage or water supply system, a doubtful supply of electricity, and a telephone system that had no connection to the outside world, marched 10,000 newcomers. The cafe was overwhelmed, and new ones went up overnight. The small hotels and boarding houses were swamped, and men rented rooms by the eight-hour shift or slept on the floor. The small government liquor store (the sale of liquor is a government monopoly everywhere

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in Canada) was besieged by long lines of thirsty customers. Bootleggers and prostitutes arrived in town, and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police increased the size of its detachment to keep them under control. By 1945, Whitehorse had changed forever, and the town was left with an array of modern facilities, as well as the largest number of baseball fields per capita of any community in Canada. Nine years later, Pierre Berton, Canada's leading popular historian and a native of the Yukon, described the town as

a cluttered hodgepodge of wartime jerry building, a wild melange of tarpaper shacks, outhouses, bunk-houses, Quonset huts, corrugated iron lean-tos . . . all mingled with piles of salvaged lumber and piping, rusted hulks of trucks and bulldozers, and scattered heaps of old oil drums. This was the mess left behind by the army.... Whitehorse was still cleaning up after them.<sup>1</sup>

The impact of the Alaska Highway and related projects on the native people of the Canadian Northwest is a topic of some debate today. One school of thought holds that the highway marked a watershed in the lives of the natives; and there is a good deal of evidence to support this view. Some native people of the southern Yukon suffered in a dramatic and terrible way from the arrival of outsiders. Although they had been in periodic contact with traders and miners for a century before the highway was built, it had always taken newcomers weeks to travel in the north, by which time they were presumably no longer in the infectious stage of whatever disease they carried. In 1942, the natives were thrust into contact with people who had flown into their country in a single day from the United States. The result was a wave of epidemics like measles, mumps, whooping cough, hepatitis, meningitis, and influenza – the community of Teslin experienced eight of them in the winter of 1942-1943. In that year the native population of the region actually declined, as deaths, particularly of children, outnumbered births.

There was also a sexual aspect to the American invasion. In the 800 miles of bush country between Dawson Creek, British Columbia, and Whitehorse, and between Whitehorse and the Alaska border, there was a very small resident white population, only a few hundred at most, concentrated in small settlements like Fort Nelson and Fort St. John. There were almost no single white women outside of these communities. Of the tens of thousands of military and civilian workers, almost all of them lonely and bored, there was a small number prepared to prey on native women, given the chance.

Although the American authorities made strenuous efforts by means of recreational activities, stern warnings, and harsh punishments to deflect or prevent the exploitation of native women, there were a number of incidents of sexual molestation.

During the war there were a few assaults on native women as well as two or three cases of assault on white women. The offenders were dealt with swiftly and harshly (specifically the isolated incident in which a black soldier was accused of assaulting a white woman), partly because of the racist atmosphere in which they took place and partly because they were a diplomatic embarrassment to the United States. The American authorities wanted to avoid giving offense to the Canadians and wished to be seen as good neighbors and good allies.

Although some women worked on the Northwest defense projects, the majority served in clerical positions in Edmonton, the main administrative center, or in one of the regional centers like Whitehorse or Dawson Creek. Only a very small number worked in isolated camps as clerks, cooks, and nurses, and their living quarters were rigidly segregated. These women were very much in demand for dances and social outings arranged by the authorities to give some semblance of a normal social life in the wilderness. One woman who worked in Whitehorse during the war remembered it as "paradise for a young girl, with all these men around... you had a date with a different fellow every night... We were flown into different air force stations around for weekends... they'd really show us a good time."<sup>2</sup>

On the whole, however, there was far less sexual activity between the Americans and the local population in the far Northwest than in other theaters during the war. Most of the evidence for this assertion is anecdotal, but a telling statistic was that the venereal disease rate for the troops in the region varied between three and five cases per thousand per year, a figure that was only 10 percent of that for the entire U.S. Army (42 cases per thousand), and the majority of such cases occurred among troops returning to the North from leave in the lower 48 states. The basic cause for this low statistic was the lack of sexual opportunity – the region was so isolated and sparsely populated that there were not even enough prostitutes to cause the authorities much worry.

Although from one perspective the Northwest defense projects were seen to have a lasting influence on the region, from another perspective, they can be seen as having only a short-term effect on the native people (apart from the mortality statistics, which are irrefutable). The projects, though massive, were not carried out on a wide front; rather, they went through a

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very narrow corridor. The inhabitants of Teslin were unfortunate enough to be in the path of the highway, but most of the natives of the Northwest were not. If they wished to avoid the newcomers, and most did, it was easy enough to do so. Some sought employment with the projects, particularly as guides and packers in the early stages of construction, while others made souvenirs that were eagerly bought by the soldiers. But most kept away from the highway, preferring to continue their life on the land; and since the fur trade continued to be profitable until after the end of the war, there was no reason for them to abandon it. What really changed the lives of the region's native people forever was not the highway but the advent of the Canadian welfare state after the end of the war.

Particularly important was the Mothers' Allowance (or "baby bonus," as it is often called) – a monthly payment to all mothers which was introduced in 1944. In order for payments to be received, the children had to attend school; and it was the lure of this money as much as anything that began to draw the native people off the land and into permanent communities. Another twist to the baby bonus was that in the North, though nowhere else in Canada, the payment was made in kind rather than in cash, because the natives were deemed not responsible enough to spend the money wisely. Thus they had to take it in supplies, not ones of their own choosing but government-approved goods (oatmeal rather than sweetened cereal, and the like). After this came all manner of other government programs; and it was these, not the highway, that really eroded the old way of life.

Another charge that was leveled both at the time and after against the Americans was that they had wantonly destroyed the stocks of game and fish in the region. Then, as now, Americans had a reputation among foreigners of being trigger-happy, and the legendary soldier shooting anything that moved with pearl-handled revolvers, or strafing helpless moose from a fighter plane, was a stock figure of anti-American mythology. There is some truth to this legend. Many of the civilian and military workers were anxious to hunt large game, partly for sport and partly to supplement their monotonous diet of Spam, dried potatoes, and canned Vienna sausage. Moose or deer meat was a treat eagerly sought after, and the military high command held out the privilege of hunting as a reward for good behavior. There were a number of complaints from residents of the region about over-hunting. But as with other matters, hunting must be put into perspective. Not all of the men wished to hunt, and even fewer had the bush skills to stray very far from the narrow construction corridors. Thus, although there was a considerable degree of over-hunting and over-fishing in the region, it was confined to

a small area; and the game which lived farther afield was not molested. It was, however, fear of destruction of game that led to the establishment of the Kluane Game Preserve in the southwest corner of the Yukon in 1942, a move that eventually led to the creation of Kluane National Park, which is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Damage to the environment was, on the other hand, a more serious matter, and one that caused lasting resentment among the region's native people. The agreement between Canada and the United States under which the projects were built permitted the Americans to use whatever natural resources they needed to complete their task, and there were no environmental constraints at all on their activities. The projects used phenomenal amounts of the region's timber, both for construction and for heating: The military establishment in Whitehorse and Watson Lake alone used 18,000 cords of firewood in 1942-1943, amounting to a pile four feet wide, four feet high, and over 27 miles long – a significant depletion of the not particularly abundant timber resources of the Southern Yukon. There was also some wanton destruction – spillage of diesel fuel that caused damage to creek beds that was still apparent 20 years after the war's end and the fouling of rivers by carelessly built latrines. There were also a number of forest fires, many caused by careless smokers, that destroyed hundreds of acres of timber throughout the Northwest. One incident, which illustrates an all too common attitude toward the environment, occurred when a man was ordered to deliver a load of diesel fuel to a remote construction camp. When he arrived at the camp he found no one there, nor could he find the storage tank for the fuel. Not wishing to wait, he dumped the 1,000- gallon load of fuel on the ground and returned to his base.

Some of the damage done to the environment came through carelessness and indifference, some through haste, and some through ignorance of the terrain in which the projects were built. Few, if any, of the builders and planners had any experience with permafrost and muskeg. The original pioneer road that the Army Corps of Engineers built – 1,500 miles in the amazingly short period of eight months – was pushed through the bush by brute force: Bulldozers knocked down the trees, machines tore up the stumps, pull-blades gouged the soil to form a crown on a dirt road, wooden culverts were laid where streams crossed the road, and log and pontoon bridges were thrown across creeks and rivers. Fortunately for the success of the enterprise, the Army's road was finished in November 1942, just as the Northwest froze solid. With the spring thaw of 1943, however, the muskeg melted and the exposed permafrost turned to thick mud, the little streams swelled and tore

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out the culverts, and the rivers flooded and ripped out dozens of bridges. The Alaska Highway became impassable, and virtually the entire road had to be rebuilt by the Public Works Administration.

Perhaps the most egregious example of the ignorance and naiveté about the environment was the CANOL Project. Viewed from a “can-do” perspective, the project was an immense success. Hundreds of tons of four- and six-inch steel pipe, heavy equipment, and supplies of all kinds had to be taken from the railhead at Fort McMurray or Waterways in north-central Alberta down the Peace River- Slave Lake-Mackenzie River system to Norman Wells, a distance of about 1,200 miles. It was not “unknown” country, as fur traders, in particular the Hudson’s Bay Company, had operated in the region for well over a century. But it was undeveloped country with a small transportation system consisting mostly of the Hudson’s Bay Company’s river steamer, which supplied the small fur trade posts along the route. Drilling 19 new wells at Norman Wells, laying out the pipeline route and the accompanying road across the country to Whitehorse, and building all the ancillary facilities proved to be a marvel of logistical organization. Over 10,000 troops and as many civilians were at work on the project at its peak in the summer of 1943.

But from an environmental perspective the project was a disaster. The construction techniques were primitive: bulldozers had cleared a path through the bush, pushing trees to one side and piling dirt and muskeg into a rough service road. The sections of pipe were welded together and the completed pipeline laid directly on the ground. And because the greater part of the route ran through permafrost country, the pipeline route soon turned into bog, the ground shifting and subsiding, often breaking the pipe and leading to spills. Moreover, a great deal of the work on the project was done by troops who hated their task. The racial policy of the U.S. Army in World War II was beset by a basic contradiction. On one hand, black troops were popularly believed to be incapable of serving effectively in cold climates, presumably due to their African heritage. On the other hand, the authorities were anxious to send them to theaters far from any large white population to minimize the possibility of racial friction – and it was the second policy that prevailed in this case. This is why thousands of black troops served on the Alaska Highway, where temperatures could go well below -40°F, and on the CANOL Project, where the weather could be even colder. Dispirited and demoralized troops meant shoddy workmanship, and the CANOL Project was plagued with breakdowns and defects of all kinds.

In the long run, these efforts went for nothing. Delays in building the refinery at Whitehorse and the pumping stations along the pipeline meant

that CANOL did not begin operations until August 1944, by which time its rationale had vanished since it had long been clear that the Japanese were no longer a threat to any part of the continental United States. Oil flowed through the line only for a few months, between breakdowns, and it was closed in March 1945 and dismantled in 1946. It had cost about \$135 million, a large sum 50 years ago, and was such a flagrant example of war-time waste and bad planning that it became the chief "whipping boy" of the Truman Committee, the Senate Special Committee Investigating the National Defense Program, which met toward the end of the war to expose waste in defense spending.

There is a second rumor, as persistent as the one about the trigger-happy Americans, that stills echoes in the Canadian Northwest. It dates from the end of the war when the construction activities were winding down and thousands of Americans were dismantling the CANOL Project, turning the Alaska Highway over to the Canadian Department of National Defence, and returning home. The gist of the rumor is that the Americans, unable to carry home all their supplies and equipment and unwilling to simply give them away to local residents, wantonly destroyed vast quantities of perfectly good food, vehicles, machinery, and other goods of all kinds. Witnesses claimed to have seen jeeps in operating condition driven into pits and buried or set on fire, hundreds of sides of beef, scores of dozens of sheets and towels doused with gasoline and burned. The Northwest was abuzz with indignation over the alleged dog-in-the-manger policy of the departing Yankees. An investigation was held, and the rumors were officially denied. The truth of the matter, as with many folk legends of this kind, is not easy to determine; but the explanation seems to run as follows: The Americans took back to the United States everything they considered worth saving. But value was a matter of perception, and there was a great deal of equipment that was not in first-class shape but that had considerable utility for local residents. An example was wood-burning stoves, which the Americans had brought in by the score. A wood stove with a damaged door would not be taken back to the lower 48 states; yet it could have been repaired locally and used, or parts could have been taken from several stoves to make one good one. Yet if the authorities had permitted people to do this kind of salvage, local merchants would have complained, and the dumps where such goods were thrown would have swarmed with would-be entrepreneurs. The simplest course then was to put all the stoves in a pile and run a bulldozer over them, and this was generally the course taken. In a marginal society, this was naturally seen as wanton waste and selfishness. Nevertheless, there was a tremendous amount of pil-

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fering, and local residents boasted that they had scrounged enough sheets and towels to last a generation. This pattern of wastage was one of the unhappier results of the whole enterprise.

\* \* \*

In the long run, the activities of the Americans in the Canadian Northwest had a dramatic and crucial effect on the region's history and development. The Canadian North, and the Northwest in particular, had long been ignored by the central government, which paid attention to it only when something dramatic like the Klondike gold rush occurred. At other times, it was a forgotten stepchild, pushed aside while regions considered more important were developed. When the Northwest defense projects were approved at the beginning of 1942, the Canadian government assigned one man to act as liaison officer between Ottawa and the upwards of 40,000 foreign military and civilian workers active in the region, then went to sleep and allowed them to do as they pleased. It was no wonder that another rumor spread that the clerk who ran the switchboard at the U.S. Army headquarters in Edmonton answered calls with a cheery "Good morning, U.S. Army of Occupation." It was not until Malcolm Macdonald, the British High Commissioner to Canada (the equivalent of ambassador), made a trip through the region and warned Ottawa that Canadian sovereignty was likely to come into question if it did not take a closer interest in the region that the government bestirred itself. And even then it only went so far as to appoint a Special Commissioner to deal with matters of concern to both countries. A number of journalists were permitted to travel the highway and pipeline and write stirring accounts, and the publicity these stories generated did keep the projects in the eye of the government as well as the public. In large measure, the war had awakened the Canadian government to its responsibilities toward the Northwest; and in that sense, the defense projects were the catalyst that brought the region into the Canadian mainstream.

But this awakening had no practical effect before 1945. Until then, the United States Army and the American civilian contractors who built the Alaska Highway and the other projects operated as if they were still in the United States, or as if they were in a conquered country. The American government insisted on and received the right of extraterritoriality of U.S. citizens, military and civilian, which meant that any American accused of a crime, no matter how serious, committed against anyone in the region, soldier or civilian, could be tried only by an American military court while



Canadian courts had no jurisdiction. The U.S. Military Police patrolled the Alaska Highway along with the RCMP; and in the more settled regions, like Whitehorse and Dawson Creek, British Columbia, they caused a good deal of resentment among the local population by their habit of bullying civilians and throwing their weight around. The Member of Parliament for the Yukon referred to them as "Gestapo," and there were a number of nasty incidents in which innocent citizens were knocked about or insulted by the MPs.

On the other hand, there were many people in the Northwest who had welcomed the arrival of the Americans. The projects provided jobs at good wages for hundreds of local civilians who had scratched their way through the depression of the 1930s. Schoolteachers from Saskatchewan, who had worked in rural schoolhouses for \$50 a month plus board and considered themselves lucky to have any job, found themselves driving a truck for an Alaska Highway contractor for \$100 a week. The defense projects were the foundation of many a small business and farm in Western Canada. For young people in the region, as elsewhere in the world, the Yankees were rich and generous visitors, not threatening strangers. One teenager in Dawson Creek, for instance, found a way to profit from the invasion. In July 1943, a troop train had derailed near the town in the middle of a heat wave:

So I thought, what a market. These guys are all complaining about the thirst. . . . I raced into town , got a couple of cream cans . . . chopped up a bunch of ice in a local ice house, threw it in the can, went to the well and pumped it full of ice cold water, went flying down the road, six inches off the ground, down to the train wreck, and the soldiers just gathered round. I didn't charge them ... just make a donation . . . I got American dollars left and right and I got, I don't know, \$20 a can for that water . . . you know, my pants were hanging down, loaded with money from these rich Americans who were just delighted with a drink of ice cold water.<sup>3</sup>

In 1946, the United States transferred control of the Alaska Highway and its ancillary facilities to the Canadian Army and pulled the last of their personnel out of the Northwest. They had arrived in 1942 in a whirlwind of activity, had changed much in their path, and had left the region substantially transformed. True, the lives of its native people, at least those who lived away from the highway corridor, were largely unaltered; but the region itself had been profoundly changed. That this was accomplished by foreigners says

## “THE ARMY OF OCCUPATION”

a great deal about Canada’s attitude toward its north. Only in the past two generations has Canada taken an active and lasting interest in the welfare and development of its vast northern lands. Before World War II, such interest was sporadic, as with the Klondike gold rush. Since the arrival of the Americans in the Northwest, Canada has assumed a responsibility for the region that it has never relinquished. This responsibility has grown, so that the Northwest is now well integrated into the Canadian nation.

The Canadian Northwest had experienced a peaceful occupation. The region’s people and their government had welcomed the arrival of the Americans and had applauded their energy, their engineering skills, and their bottomless supply of cash. But the Americans went home in 1946, leaving behind a highway not yet finished to civilian standards, a “white elephant” refinery and pipeline system, and traces of a huge military and civilian complex. For the Northwest, the occupation had brought many changes – new transportation systems, changed settlement patterns, visions of post-war prosperity, environmental damage, increased Canadian government interest in the region, and upheaval in some native communities. By 1946 a new Northwest was emerging, transformed profoundly by the American occupation.

### Notes

Reprinted from *Journal of the West* 32/4 (October 1993): 47-53. For a fuller study with detailed citations, see K. S. Coates and W. R. Morrison, *The Alaska Highway in World War II: The U.S. Army of Occupation in Canada’s Northwest* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992).

- 1 Pierre Berton, *The Mysterious North* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1956), 99.
- 2 Coates and Morrison, *Alaska Highway in World War II*, 142.
- 3 Interview with Chuck Baxter. Surrey, BC, June 1988, quoted in Coates and Morrison, *Alaska Highway in World War II*, 167.

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**ABSTRACT:** Climate change is transforming the Arctic. Questions abound about what this will mean for the Canadian Forces, for Canada's sovereignty position, for northern peoples, and for stability and security in the circumpolar world. Fortunately, Canadians have encountered and debated similar issues in the past. This volume, featuring chapters by established and emerging scholars, offers essential historical analysis on Canadian Arctic security and sovereignty policies and practices since the Second World War. The "lessons learned" lay a solid foundation for future research and historiographical debate in this dynamic field, and should inform Canadian thinking on what is necessary to protect national interests in the twenty-first-century Arctic.

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