Statement of Representative Peters regarding the Purchase of Alaska, 1868

Mr. Chairman, I shall discuss the question of a confirmation of the treaty of Alaska very briefly. I shall not pretend to bring into the discussion anything elaborate, learned, or very new; but in my own way, I wish to state a few simple and plain propositions, which have led me to the conviction that I ought to vote against this appropriation. Such was my first belief about it, and the more I have seen, heard, or read upon the subject-matter the more impressed have I been toward such a conclusion.

My starting point is that the territory is intrinsically and virtually valueless. Of course time and opportunity do not now fall to me to elucidate this proposition in all its various considerations. I know poetry can throw a charm about even frozen Alaska; that the imagination can create beauties for any land; and that the zeal and eloquence of the distinguished chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee [Mr. BANKS] has invested this theme on this occasion with an uncommon interest, which I fear may give the cause he advocates more favor than it honestly deserves. But to come down from all the stilts of romance, poetry, eloquence, and imagination, upon that plane where our calm judgments and common sense should guide us, I believe the proposition of Alaska’s worthlessness to be true. Of course I would not deny that her cod fisheries, if she has them, would be somewhat valuable; but it seems doubtful if fish can find sun enough to be cured on her shores, and if even that is so, my friend from Wisconsin [Mr. WASHBURN] shows pretty conclusively that in existing treaties we had that right already. It does seem to me that the very general and indefinite manner in which the other side meet this issue is a very strong confession on their part that but little can be said or discovered to satisfy the American people that these wild regions are worth annexing to the United States.

In support of the proposition of the utter worthlessness of this territory there are several general tests of a most important and convincing character. Conclusive proof of it is that Russia would sell her territory. If she would sell it all, she would probably have given it away. If it was not valuable to her, it will never prove of any value to us. Russia is not a Power to surrender a foothold upon earth unless it should be an actual and annoying burden to her. Her history for all time shows that she has been seeking always to aggrandize her territorial power. This very day and hour is she pushing her triumphant armies into Central Asia for the acquisition of new dominions to her widely-spread territories.

The fact of the want of population in Alaska is another conclusive argument upon the proposition maintained. She has five hundred and seventy thousand square miles of area; eleven thousand miles of coast line, including bays and harbors; and besides her Indians only about nine thousand of all other inhabitants. It has taken toward a century of the rule of Russia to have got into the country even as much as this; so that we shall pay over seven hundred dollars for our acquired sovereignty over each and every civilized and half-civilized creature in that land. Why has not Alaska a larger population? If what is said in her behalf was not founded in mere imagination, she would, instead of this little people, have had population enough to constitute her an empire.
The want of a demand for the annexation of this country in an expression of the popular will is an argument against it. The people of our country have a belief about this Arctic region which cannot be easily removed. Where are your petitions and your public demonstrations in behalf of an acceptance of Alaska? Where are any indications or movements among your mercantile classes, in your Boards of Trade, and other kindred organizations, which are always so quick and keen in all matters of population, wealth, and trade? The press of our country is against this purchase or annexation. The proposition has met with ridicule and opposition in most of the public papers except where there has been some special interest or motive for a contrary course. While our countrymen have been anxious for acquisitions of territory, and have been willing almost to declare and carry on war for such a prize, who has heard any popular voice or expression in all the length and breadth of our country in behalf of Alaska? Why does not an American population pour itself in upon her? Where are the adventurers and speculators and men of enterprise who strike for a new country to make the first fortunes and obtain the first foothold there? Where are the classes of men who build up a city in the western States and Territories almost in a day? How many of them have followed our flag to Alaska? They will never go, Mr. Chairman. Instead of an Alaskan enthusiasm and fever among the American masses the country was struck with wonder and amazement at the proposition of such an acquisition of worthless territory. The treaty was hastily confirmed, and next to no time was taken for its consideration. If it was a new question with Senators now my belief is that its fate would be a different one. It was born just ahead of a brood of births between us and Denmark and other countries, every one of which will die stillborn. The sense of the country will not allow such extraordinary consummation.

Further, it is a conclusive objection to this treaty, Mr. Chairman, that Alaska is not contiguous to any portion of our domain, but is separated from us by a great region of country belonging to Great Britain; and that the population we shall get have neither language nor mode of life like any of the different inhabitants of the United States. This objection needs no more than its naked statement to be most clearly seen and forcibly felt.

But, Mr. Chairman, Alaska, if ours, will be an enormous annual care and expense to us. I have no time to dilate upon this, but as an indicia in this respect let me read what I a moment ago cut from a morning newspaper. Such reminders as this will not be uncommon:

“United States flagship Pensacola, proceeded to Victoria, Vancouver’s Island, from San Francisco, Wednesday. The admiral will confer with the commander of the United States steamer Jamestown, now lying in Esquimalt harbor, on affairs of Alaska, the disposition of the Indians, and whether their attitude toward the new white population makes it necessary for the presence of war vessels on that coast, and even whether a fort or two is necessary for the safety of the traders.”

Two of the canons of Jefferson’s code of life might well be invoked in the consideration of the question before us: “Never spend you money before you have it.” We certainly have no millions now for such an investment. “Never buy what you do not want because it is cheap; it will be dear to you.” If the seven millions we pay now should be cheap even, the future millions to be expended would certainly make the purchase dear to us.

Mr. Chairman, I have very briefly given my reasons why we should not receive Alaska as a part of the United States. But have we the political, ay, moral right to refuse to make the desired appropriation? I have no doubt of it, not a particle, not a scintilla of doubt. It needs no learning or book exploration to appreciate it beyond a common sense reading of the Constitution of our country. It is as plain as the plainest illustration can make it. The President and Senate cannot complete a treaty, which necessarily

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and primarily calls for an appropriation of money, without the assent of the Representative of the people. Bear in mind, this so-called treaty settled no controversy; established no disputed line; created no alliance; is the incident, accident, or adjunct of nothing else; but is a naked agreement for the purchase of country; a bare call for an appropriation, nothing else. What is called a “treaty” is strictly and merely an agreement to appropriate, or that this House shall appropriate, a sum of money. Now, if the treaty-making power can buy they can sell. If they can buy land for money, they can buy money for land. If they can buy a part of a country, they can buy the whole of a country; if they can sell a part, they can sell the whole of our country, and this, too, against the wishes of a people as protected and expressed in the popular representatives. Are we ready to accept such an interpretation?

There is no pretense that the Senate committed any wrong. They did what they could to make a treaty, but it was of such a nature that it was incipient or conditional only, and could never become complete till its approval by ourselves. This duty we must perform upon our own responsibility, and in good faith to our country and constituents, without regard to anything which has been done by anybody else. Russia could know, should know, was presumed to know, and did know, that the attempted treaty was incomplete, and she can find no fault, whatever the result of this deliberation may be. The President has prematurely taken possession of the country attempted to be ceded, hoping the appropriation would be made. In this Russia took with him the risk of the result. May it not have been done as a moral force to compel us to make the appropriation?

But Russia is a friendly Power, it is said, and it would be impolitic to offend her. If she is friendly, then she will never have an idea of any hostile resorts on account of the acts of Andrew Johnson notoriously unauthorized, and assented to by herself. It would be the last way she should show her spirit of regard for us, to attempt to impose this cession of territory upon an unwilling people. Better refuse an acceptance of the territory and pay Russia any damage which it has occasioned her for our protectorate of Alaska during a year, and flying our flag over that distant possession. There may be some inconvenience in our dispossessing of Russian authority for a time, but all those evils had better be borne, and anyhow reasonably compensated, than allow this opportunity to go by for a practical assertion of a doctrine, which, if surrendered, may at some day destroy the liberties of the people.