

# Note

## Northward ho! Obama, Diefenbaker and the North American Arctic

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### Introduction

President Barack Obama became, in September 2015, the first US president to travel north of the Arctic Circle. Having started his Alaskan itinerary in Anchorage, attending and speaking at a conference involving Secretary of State John Kerry and invited guests, the president travelled north to the small town of Kotzebue, a community of some 3000 people with the majority of inhabitants identifying as native American. Delivered to an audience in the local high school numbering around 1000, the 41st US president placed his visit within a longer presidential tradition of northern visitation:

I did have my team look into what other Presidents have done when they visited Alaska. I'm not the first President to come to Alaska. Warren Harding spent more than two weeks here – which I would love to do. But I can't leave Congress alone that long. (Laughter.) Something might happen. When FDR visited – Franklin Delano Roosevelt – his opponents started a rumor that he left his dog, Fala, on the Aleutian Islands – and spent 20 million taxpayer dollars to send a destroyer to pick him up. Now, I'm astonished that anybody would make something up about a President. (Laughter.) But FDR did not take it lying down. He said, "I don't resent attacks, and my family doesn't resent attacks – but Fala does resent attacks. He's not been the same dog since." (Laughter.) President Carter did some fishing when he visited. And I wouldn't mind coming back to Alaska to do some fly-fishing someday. You cannot see Alaska in three days. It's too big. It's too vast. It's too diverse. (Applause.) So I'm going to have to come back. I may not be President anymore, but hopefully I'd still get a pretty good reception. (Applause.) And just in case, I'll bring Michelle, who I know will get a good reception. (Applause.) . . . . But there's one thing no American President has done before – and that's travel above the Arctic Circle. (Applause.) So I couldn't be prouder to be the first, and to spend some time with all of you (Obama 2015a).

Interestingly, there was no reference to President Theodore Roosevelt (1901–1909) who played a role in negotiating the international boundary between Alaska and Canada, and establishing the Tongass National Forest in southeast Alaska. Roosevelt was arguably the most conservationist-minded of US presidents, and an advocate of US national park system across the states and territories (Brinkley 2010).

This note considers President Obama's visit north of the Arctic Circle in comparison to that of another leading political figure in the Canadian context. Separated by some 50 years, and a very different geopolitical and environmental context, the

visits offer insights into the manner in which the Arctic has been represented, understood, and even embodied. In 1950, as a Progressive Conservative party leadership contender and a parliamentary representative from Saskatchewan John Diefenbaker travelled north of the Arctic Circle in the Yukon Territory. He visited Old Crow and was apparently alarmed to learn that local community members were using United States stamps rather than Canadian stamps to post their letters (MacDonald 2012: 296). This was a comparatively minor affair, albeit one with implications for Canadian sovereignty, when compared to his observations regarding the basic living conditions and community infrastructure. However, the Arctic visit that I concentrate on is a later one, the 'Opening on Inuvik' visit in July 1961, where Diefenbaker and his wife flew into via RCAF Northstar (Piggott 2002: 234). As with President Obama, Diefenbaker was eager, in the midst of the 1957 federal election, to present a new 'Vision for the North'. In Obama's case one where climate change was placed in the foreground as the greatest challenge facing the Arctic region, and in Diefenbaker's case where northern economic development featured strongly. However, both political leaders were attentive to the intersection of environments, resources, and communities in the Arctic region and their collective speeches and accompanying images of their visits offer important insights into how the Arctic is imagined and represented. Both leaders visited and engaged with local communities and both visits attracted media and public attention.

### Prime Minister Diefenbaker and the 'Opening of Inuvik'

Prime Minister John Diefenbaker (1957–1963) was a staunch advocate of the Canadian north as integral to a 'new vision' for the country. In February 1958, Diefenbaker made a stirring campaign speech in Winnipeg in which he outlined this vision:

This national Development Policy will create a new sense of National Purpose and National Destiny. One Canada! One Canada, wherein Canadians will have preserved to them the control of their own economic and political destiny. Sir John A. Macdonald gave his life to this Party. He opened the West. He saw Canada from East to West. I see a new Canada – a Canada of the North (Diefenbaker 1961).

Diefenbaker's speech and subsequent prime ministerial career was one characterised by a strong rhetorical commitment to northern infrastructural investment, scientific research and community development (Diefenbaker 1958; Wynn 2007: 315). At the time of his campaign speech, Canada was embedded in US security plans for a distant early warning system and committed to a polar continental shelf project, both of which were inspired and motivated by a cold war geopolitical imagination (Grace 2002: 69–70; Powell 2008). The north American Arctic was understood to be on the frontline of the cold war, and Canada was eager to support its sovereignty and security interests through scientific mapping of polar territory for example.

The visit to the northern town of Inuvik in July 1961 was the first by a Canadian Prime Minister, north of the Arctic Circle. Standing behind a small podium covered in two large Red Ensign Canada flags, Diefenbaker delivered a speech, which



Fig. 1. Prime Minister John Diefenbaker delivering the 'Opening of Inuvik' speech, 21 July 1961

outlined the rationale and purpose of the dedication ceremony (Fig. 1). He reminded his audience of a longer Canadian prime ministerial history:

And there is history of another sort in the fact that I am here with you today - the first Canadian Prime Minister to travel north of the Arctic Circle. I could not help thinking as we flew north from Fort Simpson - and this vast unrolling landscape kept pushing the horizons always farther away - of another Prime Minister of Canada, the first. I thought of Sir John A. MacDonald and how he would have wished to be at this ceremony today (Diefenbaker 1961).

He ended, however, on a broader note. While much of his talk addressed the local history and geography of the Mackenzie delta region, he concluded with the idea that Inuvik might actually embody a circumpolar aspiration.

The history of this modern Arctic town is one that President Obama might have understood given his comments about flooding and erosion in coastal and estuarine Alaska. Inuvik was conceived in 1953 as an alternative living area for the residents of Aklavik. Located to the west of the Mackenzie delta region, the village of Aklavik was prone to flooding and considered unsuitable for future development. The relocation plan later involved a renaming and the town became Inuvik in the late 1950s. As with Kotzebue, Inuvik was in at the time of the 1961 prime ministerial visit a small settlement with only 1500 people. But as Diefenbaker noted, the town faced considerable physical and environmental challenges ranging from constructing a community on permafrost to dealing with the continuing dangers of flooding:

I have learned with deep regret of the floods suffered this spring by the Aklavik area with the tragic loss of fur-bearing animals, and the hardship this brought to many trappers, many perhaps relatives and friends of yours. Happily, there seems to have been no loss of human life. But 61 families, I am told, had to be evacuated from their homes at Aklavik and many others must have suffered varying degrees of inundation and flood damage. Floods of this proportion - though they be exceptional - illustrate the threat that hangs over a community whose foundations so much at the mercy of the river (Diefenbaker 1961).

Diefenbaker's speech was wide-ranging, and intended to offer a 'future of the north'. He concluded his speech with

the hope that this new town would offer a model to wider circumpolar possibilities using the register of race rather than geography. As he concluded:

You have a brand new monument in a brand new town. In its graceful upward curves it could be a symbol of the world. It is a symbol of racial unity yet at the same time its sphere is the contour of the world. Would be more appropriate than this new "world" emerging above the Arctic Circle out of the spirit of cooperation that built your town? It is this world - a new world for all the people of the Arctic regions - that we in Canada are working to build.

It is sobering, however, to recall that in another part of the Canadian Arctic, northern communities were re-located in order to 'populate' Grise Ford and Ellesmere Bay in 1953. An egregious example of what critics would term 'domicide', in the name of territorial integrity and continental security (Porteous and Smith 2001: 103).

His speech, however, was only one element of the visit itself. Diefenbaker met local residents and Mrs. Diefenbaker was presented with three white fox skins as a material reminder of their visit, after she unveiled a bronze monument acknowledging the inauguration of the town (Robertson 2000). As Gordon Robertson, a seasoned Canadian civil servant noted in his memoir, 'Diefenbaker was legitimately pleased that he should be the first: it was he who awakened Canadians to their northern destiny - whatever that might turn out to be' (Robertson 2000: 185).

For Prime Minister Stephen Harper (2006–present), the prime ministerial visit of 1961 has proved immensely productive as a way of promoting his dictum, 'We are a northern country' (Dodds 2011). As Harper explained, just before embarking for a visit to Inuvik and other northern Canadian towns in August 2008:

On this trip, our itinerary includes Tuktoyaktuk, Dawson City and Inuvik, the Arctic community that was founded by Prime Minister Diefenbaker's government in the late 1950s. While visiting Inuvik, I will meet with the premiers of the territorial governments and with Aboriginal community leaders. We will also hold the first ever federal cabinet meeting north of 60. This trip is historic and it demonstrates once again the importance our Government places on the North. With the retreat of polar ice, increasing navigability of the Northwest Passage and the growing global interest in Arctic resources, Canada faces unprecedented opportunities, but also unprecedented challenges in the North (Harper 2008).

### President Obama and the 'Kotzebue Speech'

President Obama's trip was a rather different one to that of Diefenbaker, notably in terms of policy framing, geopolitical circumstances and media context. For the Obama visit, climate change, the US Chairmanship of the Arctic Council (2015–2017) and presidential tweeting made it quite distinct to the Diefenbaker era (see, for example, Obama 2015b). The president's Alaska visit was also notable for the way in which it travelled above and through northern and central Alaska. A presidential photograph from his aircraft gazing down at Kivalina Island became a focal point for expressing concern over the dangers posed by rising sea levels and the prospect of an Alaskan community having to relocate. Appearing some ten years after the flooding of New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina, the image contributed to a visual and textual narrative linking his visit to local ecologies and economics (for example visiting fishing communities in Bristol Bay), state level politics (for example renaming Mount McKinley to Mount Denali),



Fig. 2. President Barack Obama delivering 'Remarks by the President at Kotzebue High School, Kotzebue' 2 September 2015

national/federal priorities for the Arctic (for example the 2013 US National Strategy for the Arctic Region) and global circulations and interactions involving the Arctic region and beyond.

In his speech delivered at Kotzebue Middle/High School, President Obama like Diefenbaker delivered a wide-ranging speech (Fig. 2). The president recalled the 'pioneering independent spirit of America' and drew upon his birthplace Hawaii to accentuate his empathy for a state that is geographically distinct from continental United States. As President Obama noted, 'But there is a similarity... what is called the Aloha spirit there. I know you have the same spirit here – the notion that we're all in this together'. As with Diefenbaker, Obama envisaged Alaska as a space of possibility, a realm, which was judged to be fundamental to 'maintain[ing] America's status as an Arctic power' and yet a place that finds itself on the frontline of changing global climate. He expressed his personal sense of frustration that, 'Over the past few years, I've been trying to make the rest of the country more aware of a changing climate, but you're already living it'.

However, Obama's public record on climate change and energy politics is controversial. Public opposition in the 'Lower 48' greeted federal government approval for Shell to resume oil exploration in the Chukchi Sea in 2015. In cities such as Portland and Seattle, activists sought to block drilling related shipping and equipment from heading northwards (see, for example, Plumer 2015). In 2008 the company purchased exploratory leases in federal waters in both the Chukchi and Beaufort Seas, to the north of Alaska. Since that purchase, Shell has faced a barrage of criticism for its actual and proposed activities, with critics focusing in on a high profile accident (for example the grounding of the Kulluk oil drilling barge in December 2012) and the future possibility of oil spills in the frigid waters off the Alaskan Arctic.

What we might take away from Obama's 'Kotzebue speech' and visit more generally is the manner in which Alaska continues to be a productive resource for mobilising alternative geographical imaginations: Alaska as a resource frontier, homeland, harbinger of climate change, and under-appreciated strategic space (Kollin 2001). On the one hand, Alaska as a resource frontier and on the other hand, the most northern state has been understood to be a boundless wilderness. President Obama's

speech might be understood as an intervention designed to utilise both imaginaries, while positing a third (Alaska as the frontline of climate change). As such his speech sought to navigate a 'third way', gesturing towards all three of those geographical imaginaries in a way designed to reach out to different constituencies, within and beyond Alaska. Intriguingly, he called for greater resilience for those living in the state while making the point that if climate change was considered to be a more conventional military/strategic threat then 'we'd do everything in our power to protect it'.

### Summary

The first visit by a US president north of the Arctic Circle has been widely reported in US and international media organisations. As such it surely tells us something that such a visit is in itself judged still to be newsworthy. Both men were visiting northern communities on the back of environmental change. Diefenbaker's Inuvik visit owed its existence to previous flooding episodes of the Mackenzie River delta region and some of the communities visited by President Obama were highlighted as vulnerable to continuing coastal erosion and flooding. Both men gave speeches outlining their vision for the Arctic while remaining strategically silent on other aspects of contemporary Arctic politics and policy: in Diefenbaker's case Inuit relocation and US strategic presence in northern Canada and in Obama's case approval for renewed oil and gas exploration in the waters north of Alaska.

While prime ministerial and presidential speeches and visits are only one element in how we might make sense of Arctic politics and policy, they continue to play an important role in how political leaders communicate to 'northern' and 'southern' constituencies. Both speeches illustrate the usage of spatial and experiential markers, linking local and regional issues and examples to national and circumpolar/global politics. In their different ways, separated by some 50 years, both political leaders were negotiating changing Arctic(s) and grappling with the challenge of understanding future possibilities for these parts of the world.

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