

## President Obama's Arctic Trip

This past week President Obama became the first American President to travel above the Arctic Circle. (What! Theodore Roosevelt never did it?). That's surprising – the Arctic Circle is rather close (about 1900 miles from Washington DC, less than Los Angeles). Unlike Antarctica, it is not an island but a region with a community of nations: Canada, Russia, Greenland, Norway, Sweden, Finland and the United States. The Arctic is populated both with indigenous and immigrant peoples and rich in natural resources (principally oil and gas), with commercial development in shipping and in exploiting those resources.

We should not overstate the Arctic's accessibility; one of the most surprising facts I learned when I was working on missions to explore other worlds that as of the end of the Apollo era (the late 1970s) more people and ships had visited the Moon than had crossed the Northwest Passage – from the Atlantic to the Pacific over Canada. That's no longer true – more on that below

I have personally visited the Arctic three times: to Devon Island (Canada), to Murmansk and the Barents Sea (Russia), and to Fairbanks Alaska (U.S.). On one of those trips I even walked on the Arctic Ocean. That walk on the frozen Arctic was in Resolute Bay, Canada while waiting for clear weather permitting us to fly to Devon Island where I was visiting the Haughton Mars Project, a scientific study of a simulated Mars base. One month after that walk, I was again above the Arctic Circle, but this time in the Eastern Hemisphere – in the Barents Sea outside of Murmansk, Russia. There I was on a Russian Navy ship to observe the submarine launch of an Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile which was giving us a free flight to test solar sail deployment. Unlike those two remote adventures, the third Arctic visit was more of a tourist trip to Fairbanks on a Planetary Society tour to observe the Northern Lights. Three Planetary Society trips to the Arctic give testimony to the idea of exploring other worlds to better understand our own. A fourth, and very lamentable, Planetary Society trip to the Arctic Ocean was by our robot first solar sail spacecraft, Cosmos 1, which fell into to Ocean when its Russian launch vehicle failed.

The President's trip is multi-symbolic. He will defend his decision to permit Chukchi Sea drilling by Shell Oil as a balance of environmental, energy and economic concerns. He will visit a glacier research facility and a glacier itself, calling attention to the global warming that is resulting in the melting of glaciers – raising sea levels, presaging environmental catastrophes. He will visit with fisherman addressing other economic and environmental issues affecting the world's food supply. But as the first Presidential visit to the Arctic, it is perhaps the geopolitical symbol that looms largest. More than just the seven Arctic countries cited above are interested in development there – others include Korea, many in Europe, China and even Singapore.. Singapore? – if that seems strange think about England and France developing the Suez Canal. The Northwest Passage may be the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Suez (or more poignantly) Panama Canal.

The resultant rise in sea levels from the melting of the glaciers is one of the main reason that the U.S. Department of Defense has classified Climate Change as a major national security threat. They get, what the ideologues who fear environmental regulation don't – namely that whatever the cause of global warming, the effect is undeniable, and whatever Earth's past history has been, there is one new factor which magnifies the effect: population. Billions of people will be flooded or have their agriculture and water supplies disrupted; those factors will lead to more geopolitical instability. I am

pretty sure that the pictures of President Obama on a glacier will arouse the ideologues. Hopefully, it will also arouse a larger political base who do not deny science and are willing to deal with the complexities of a very interdependent world.

Travel changes perceptions; as Marcel Proust noted, “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.” When a President makes a first trip anywhere he brings along billions of vicarious travelers with him. I was deeply moved by my personal trips to the Arctic -- seeing the world (and issues) with new eyes. I am sure he will be far more moved – with a much wider and deeper exposure to the still rather unexplored Arctic. What one hopes is that he brings with him on this voyage the new eyes of America’s and the world’s population.

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