

# Clan, the State, and War

## Lessons from the Far North

By BARRY S. ZELLEN

Since the modern state first encroached upon their pristine and sparsely inhabited homeland 400 years ago, the Inuit of the Arctic have aspired to restore their Aboriginal rights and cultural traditions, and whenever possible, to reclaim components of their indigenous sovereignty. As the Inuit learned more about the systems and structures of governance that were exported from Europe and later the newly independent capitals of North America, they found new ways to reclaim many lost powers through innovative domestic diplomacy, negotiation, and various forms of political protest.

This contrasted elsewhere in the Americas, where the modern state collided more forcefully with the interests and sovereign aspirations of hundreds of indigenous empires, nations, and tribes from the late 15<sup>th</sup> century onward. The result was annihilatory warfare, genocide, forced migrations, and coercive assimilation policies—all aiming at the general extinguishment of indigenous identity. It was a brutal chapter in history that pioneered the art of ethnic cleansing but that resulted through its decisive results in domestic security and opened up an entire continent to American power. While a part of American history that evokes much guilt nowadays, our three centuries of Indian wars provided us with a useful testing ground for counterinsurgency, coalition warfare with tribal allies, balance-of-power diplomacy, and many an improvised admixture of hard, soft, and smart power. Who we are as a nation, and how we fight wars around the world, continues to be shaped by our experience tackling the many security challenges presented by America's first inhabitants and their spirited defense against our inevitable expansion.

In the Far North of our continent, the state collided with indigenous tribes much later in history, with economic contact, and later military interaction, starting in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. By the time the presence of a rapidly modernizing state began to be felt in the Far North, its methods for asserting political control began to mellow, with hard power shifting to soft power and treaty negotiation replacing conquest for the final integration of the last, virgin territories into the American and the Canadian polities.

In 1867, America purchased Alaska from Russia and with it Russia's assertion of sovereignty over Alaska's interior tribes, and because of its harsh climate and remote location, most Americans thought William Seward was foolish to have spent \$7 million on these frozen acres, dubbing the new territory "Seward's Ice Box" or "Seward's Folly." Great Britain, and later Canada, similarly bought their way to sovereign expansion, not by purchasing the land from a competing power but by entering into a series of numbered treaties, nation to nation, that brought the

western tribes into its expanding confederation. Thus, largely through negotiation between two unequal parties, tribe and state, the new territories of the Far North entered into southern control without, by and large, recourse to war—with exceptions including the Métis rebellion from 1871 through 1885, and the more limited armed uprising at Oka, Quebec, in 1990. Because the political integration of the Far North was achieved largely without war, the preferred tools for reconciling the interests of tribe and state would remain predominantly nonviolent, modeled on the treaty process, with negotiation helping to bring some balance to the many other asymmetries—such as economic and military power—that separated the indigenous tribes from the modern states laying sovereign claim to the North.

While the expansion of the modern state into the North did not require frontier warfare as experienced elsewhere in America's expansion, modern warfare did have a profound sociopolitical impact on the relationship between Alaska Natives and the modern state. This was most dramatically illustrated in June 1942 when Japan bombed Dutch Harbor and invaded the islands of Attu and Kiska in the Western Aleutians. With Japan's forcible resettlement of the surviving native Aleuts from Attu to Hokkaido for the remainder of the war, Alaska Natives quickly recognized that they too faced grave danger, and the crucible of war would help to tighten the bond between Alaska's indigenous peoples and the rapidly expanding modern state, which mobilized for war by building new air-strips, surging manpower, and cutting the Alaska Highway across 1,400 miles of northern wilderness in 1942.

While this rapid mobilization would create many stresses and strains on the long-isolated Native population, including the painful odyssey of the remaining Aleut population as it was relocated outside the war zone to camps in Alaska's southeast, the wartime experience would also help bring the two peoples closer together—most evident in the formation of the Alaska Eskimo Scouts in 1942, the famed "Tundra Army" organized by Major Marvin "Muktuk" Marston, which would become the Alaska Territorial Guard, with thousands of volunteers representing over 100 Aleut, Athabaskan, Inupiaq, Haida, Tlingit, Tsimshian, Yupik, and non-Native communities. In the high North Atlantic, the dual impact of the Battle of the Atlantic, and America's defense of Greenland and maritime Canada, would similarly bring modern state power into remote and traditional Inuit territories in Labrador, Baffin Island, and Greenland. Later, during the Cold War, the massive DEW (Distant Early Warning) Line Project and integration of the isolated Arctic coast into North America's air defense would have a similarly transformative impact, extending modern state power deeper into the homeland of the Canadian Inuit.

Native participation in the defense of Alaska would provide a powerful unifying force, stimulating the movement for Native rights that culminated in the historic 1971 passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, the pioneering land treaty transferring 44 million acres of land title and \$1 billion in compensation to Alaska Natives, a model embraced and later enhanced

---

Barry S. Zellen is Research Director of the Arctic Security Project at the Naval Postgraduate School. He is the author of *Arctic Doom, Arctic Boom: The Geopolitics of Climate Change in the Arctic* (Praeger, 2009), and *On Thin Ice: The Inuit, the State, and the Challenge of Arctic Sovereignty* (Lexington Books, 2009).

as Inuit land claims were negotiated across the entire North American Arctic, with Inuit gaining title to nearly one-tenth of their traditional land base, and new co-management structures enabling a joint approach to managing natural resources, land access, and economic development.

A new spirit of reconciliation between tribe and state thus emerged in the Far North, recognizing two fundamental truths on the ground: that the modern state had arrived, and with it a preponderance of power; but also that the indigenous tribes had long been there, with their own traditions and cultures—and that these cultures still mattered. This reconciliation has resulted in new governing institutions to moderate this “clash of civilizations” along the last frontier, as new forms of local, regional, territorial, and even tribal governance have taken root—some using a public governance model while others embracing a more traditional tribal model. At the municipal level of government, there is the North Slope Borough in Alaska, a vast municipality that sustains itself through property taxation of the Prudhoe Bay oil facilities, a borough larger in size than the state of Massachusetts but governing a population of just 6,000—with hundreds of millions in petro-dollars to build world-class infrastructure and provide modern government services. At the territorial level, there is the vast Nunavut Territory, governing one-fifth of Canada’s landmass, home to just 30,000 people, almost all Inuit, scattered across 28 villages in an area larger than Europe—and a source of much of Canada’s future natural resource wealth and strategic waterways. And at the tribal level, there is the new Inuit government of Nunatsiavut in northern Labrador, which has a unique Inuit constitution that governs its 2,000 Inuit residents living in six villages in a traditional manner, rejecting a public governance model in favor of one that is more distinctively tribal in nature.

As shown by these innovations in northern governance, indigenous culture has become increasingly recognized not as a fault line of conflict but as a new and viable boundary line for political institutions, providing a foundation for political stability. The experience in the Far North suggests that with prudence and innovation, and a willingness to redraw political boundaries to better reflect the underlying ethnocultural topology, it is possible to create stable frontier regions free of war, and with effective mechanisms for mediating tribe-state disputes before they explode into violent conflicts.

“multicultural nationalism”—and important indigenous groups allied themselves so openly and collaborated so closely.<sup>4</sup> Today, even Correa must rein in political bravura while wondering if past is prologue.

And in Peru, contending national forces conduct their arm wrestling in the arena of ethnic politics, a development that has already claimed the lives of scores of poor Indians and underresourced police, two communities that share a common status-gap with their country’s ruling elite. The case of Peru is significantly unlike that found in neighboring Bolivia and Ecuador, as the armed forces in the former embarked on a herculean but ultimately unsuccessful attempt to radically restructure the country so as to prevent a violent revolution from below. There, military

*in Peru, contending national forces conduct their arm wrestling in the arena of ethnic politics, a development that has already claimed the lives of scores of poor Indians and underresourced police*

government and movements, not by elected democracy, have historically ushered in measurable progress for indigenous peoples, although with varying degrees of respect for their indigeneity.

In Central America, the entire eastern region of Nicaragua has been declared an independent state by a majority of that country’s indigenous peoples, many veterans of the anti-Sandinista struggles of the 1980s, with a call for a new ethnic armed force.

### **Ethnicities and Militaries**

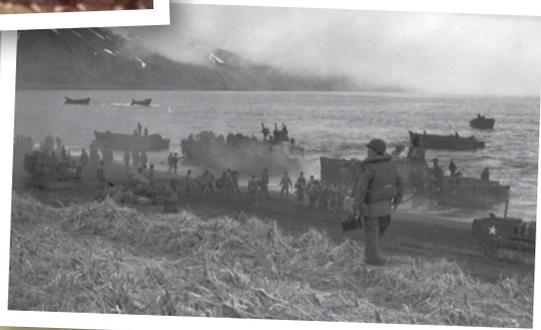
Ethnicity and the roles played by military and security forces thus have obtained a relevance that belies the paucity of contemporary scholarship on them. Three decades ago, before the fall of the Berlin Wall and the resurgence of nationalities in the former Soviet empire, before the emergence of Native Americans as a political force in a broad swath of Latin American countries, and before the latticework of extra-hemispheric ethnic revivals ranging from Greenland to western China, a small but important body of academic literature emerged on the intersection between ethnicity and the military in the developing world. U.S. political scientist Cynthia Enloe

Library and Archives Canada (O.B. Buell)



**Indigenous Métis men taken prisoner during rebellion against Canada, 1885**

**U.S. troops land on Attu after Japanese invasion, May 1943**



Emmerdorf Air Force Base History Office