**Homer Alaska - News**

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**Why did statehood for Alaska take so long?**  
*Historian ties answer to civil rights movement, LBJ's quest for presidency*  
  
**BY Hal Spence   
For the Homer News**

Had a U.S. senator from Texas named Lyndon Baines Johnson lacked the boundless ambition and aptitude for Machiavellian maneuver that characterized his political career, Alaska might still be a territory.

By some accounts an ardent bigot, Johnson's political aspirations to become president of the United States transcended his prejudices, and that, says Alaska historian Dr. Terrence Cole, made all the difference.

Cole visited Homer on Monday, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, and delivered a talk on Alaska's role in the U.S. civil rights movement at the Kachemak Bay Campus, Kenai Peninsula College-University of Alaska Anchorage. A professor of history at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, Cole said he "had no good answer" when people would ask him why it had taken so long for Alaska to win statehood.

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| [[http://homernews.com/images/011911/15658_256.jpg](http://homernews.com/images/011911/15658_512.jpg)](http://homernews.com/images/011911/15658_512.jpg)  Photo by Kate Spence  Terrence Cole |

After six years of research and writing, Cole has presented his answer in his book, "Fighting for the Forty-Ninth Star: C. W. Snedden and the Crusade for Alaska Statehood." (Snedden bought the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner in 1950.) In it, Cole asserts direct causes no other historian has explored — civil rights opposition in the south and Johnson's eye on the presidency.

By the 1950s, Alaska and Hawaii statehood had the support of 95 percent of Americans, yet statehood remained a distant dream. The roadblock was the U.S. Senate.

The "public" face of opposition among senators, Cole said, often centered on questions of finance — could Alaska pay its own way, or would it become a burden on the nation? A few proposed commonwealth status, which Cole called a "red herring," because neither Alaska nor Hawaii could have become commonwealths.

Cole argues that the real reason for opposing statehood for Alaska and Hawaii was control of the U. S. Senate and specifically, the power of filibuster over the fate of civil rights legislation.

"[Control of the Senate] is the beginning of the issue, it is the end of the issue," Cole said.

Both the Democratic and Republican parties were internally divided over civil rights and integration. As a result, members from southern states, many of whom were segregationist Democrats, controlled the Senate despite being a minority.

"They, in fact, had the choke point on it from the 1930s on, and certainly throughout the 1950s," Cole said.

The southerners knew the status quo and their ability to thwart future civil rights legislation would be threatened by the addition of four more state senators, who likely would be progressives on the issue.

"Keeping Alaska out of the union [was] another way to keep black children out of white schools," Cole said.

Not unlike today, the Senate was where legislation, especially civil rights legislation, went to die. No civil rights bill passed the U.S. Senate from the 1870s to the late 1950s, Cole noted.

But conditions began to shift in 1956. With the help of fellow Texan, House Speaker Sam Rayburn, a Democrat, Lyndon Johnson (named Texas' "favorite son" candidate at that year's Democratic Party convention) began maneuvering to become his party's nominee for president in 1960. Knowing he would need the support of northern and western Democrats, he determined to change his stripes, recasting himself as a western progressive who supported and then championed civil rights, Cole said. Whether it was heartfelt or cold politics is a matter of debate, but in 1957 and 1958, Johnson's ambitions had a singular effect on civil rights and Alaska's future.

Johnson backed the 1957 Civil Rights Act, the first passed by the Senate since Reconstruction. Though a bill with no teeth, it was symbolic. Johnson's and Rayburn's "amazing alchemy" kept the party together, Cole said. The vote, overwhelmingly favorable at 60-15, had to wait out the longest one-man filibuster in Senate history, 24 hours and 18 minutes, conducted by Sen. Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, then a Democrat.

Passage was assured, in part, because Sen. Richard Russell, D-Ga., the Senate's leading opponent of desegregation and Johnson's Senate mentor, decided not to filibuster the bill, Cole said. That, and the measure's overall feebleness, helped keep the Democratic Party's disparate factions together into the 1960 election year, Cole said.

In 1958, as the powerful majority leader, Johnson "set up" the Senate to approve Alaska statehood, though as far as his presidential ambitions were concerned, he'd already established his civil rights credentials with passage of the 1957 Civil Rights Act, Cole said. After passing in the House, the Senate voted 64-20 in favor of Alaska entering the union. Johnson, meanwhile, had arranged to be out of Washington for the vote, and thus left "no mark" on the bill, Cole noted.

"That's why we are a state," Cole said. "Because Johnson wanted to be president. I'm stunned no one else has pointed this out before."

Alaska statehood and civil rights for blacks were both held up by "the congregation of southern powerbrokers who did not want to let black children go to white schools, or let black people sit in the front of the bus, or who didn't want to let black people sit at clean lunch counters," Cole said.

By 1964, Johnson was president, assuming the office after Kennedy's assassination in 1963. He would be responsible for the Civil Rights Act of 1964, this time very much leaving his mark. Notably, the final vote on that measure came only after a 71-29 vote to end a filibuster, thanks to a four-vote margin — exactly the number provided by Alaska and Hawaii, Cole said. The subsequent vote on the bill passed by an identical margin.

Hal Spence is a freelance writer who lives in Homer.