BY PATRICK MAZZA
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Seattle Goes Global: a Center of Empire

Seattle was born in the global marketplace. The big trees that greeted the first settlers became the city's earliest major industry, timber. Seattle had the broad, deep Puget Sound to ship boards around the Pacific, building cities from San Francisco to Manila. Old growth trees logged on the hills were sent down a muddy "skid road" to Henry Yesler's sawmill on Elliott Bay. The trees skidded down first, then the workers spending their earnings on booze. That was the origin of the term "skid row." The mill is long gone, but the troubled and addicted still sleep in doorways in what is today the Pioneer Square neighborhood.

In _The Pacific Raincoast_, an ecological history of Washington and Oregon west of the Cascade Mountains, author Robert Bunting notes that this early link to the global economy imbued Seattle with the boom-and-bust gold rush mentality that has since gone through iterations from aerospace to computers. That mentality was fortified when Seattle became the jumping off point for the 1890s Yukon Gold Rush. Donald Trump's German

immigrant grandfather, Frederick Trump, came to Seattle then to make his fortune. On Pioneer Square he operated what was called a "fancy restaurant," said to offer services to meet human hungers beyond food and drink, before he moved on to make the original Trump family fortune up in the Yukon.

Bunting contrasts the ecological roots of Seattle in logging the big trees with those of it its humbler neighbor to the south, Portland, which grew out of the agricultural Willamette Valley. Portland was a farm service town with a more communitarian air, a place where you didn't stick your head up too high. They also cut down trees in Oregon, but the hazardous Columbia Bar retarded shipping until later.

Seattle remains one of the major West Coast ports, and the U.S. port closest to Asia. Much of the trade with China flows through here. The largest of container ships dock amid a forest of cranes. Drayage trucks hauling containers choke the highways. Many go to a huge warehouse complex south of the city on flatlands created by mudflows from Mt. Rainier eruptions.

The birth of Boeing

The institution of the global most associated with Seattle when I first lived here in 1977 was Boeing, the corporation's origin point. It also has ecological roots. Bill Boeing was drawn to Seattle by the spruce tree lumber of which airplanes used to be made. About a five-minute walk from my house down the hill to Lake Union is where Boeing assembled and flew his first aircraft, a seaplane. It was 1916 during the First World War. Boeing had a military market in mind. The corporation was nurtured along by the federal government in the interwar period with mail contracts and then in the 1930s, with contracts to build the B-17 Flying Fortress.

With World War II, production amped up. It was the next big gold rush. Seattle experienced revolutionary change. Tens of thousands moved in from all over the country. That included the first substantial African-American community coming mostly from Louisiana and Texas, the one that later birthed Jimi Hendrix. B-17s and B-29s rolled off the lines to fight the war. Today the corporation continues as the second largest military contractor, making everything from fighters to air tankers. It is by reputation more the font of new weapons concepts, such as the satellite-guided bomb, than the number one contractor, Lockheed Martin.

Boeing created the icon of the modern, interconnected global world that emerged in the 1950s and '60s, the passenger jetliner. Boeing produced the first successful jetliner, the 707. The British Comet came before but its tails had a nasty habit of falling off. With

Europe's Airbus it remains one of the globe's two major producers of passenger jetliners. Driving up I-5 past Boeing Field in south Seattle, one can often see rows of 737s with different airline liveries parked awaiting final delivery to their customers after rolling off the line at Renton just south of the city. It became quite crowded when the crash-prone 737-800 Max was grounded. Even though headquarters has officially moved to Washington, DC, much of the action remains around the Puget Sound.

The coming of the tech lords

Boeing linked the globe physically with its jetliners. The matrix electronically weaving the planet together tracks back in many ways to Seattle, to 1978 when Bill Gates and Paul Allen moved their budding software company from Albuquerque to their hometown, and began its transformation into one of the world's primary technology centers. It was the next gold rush, and one that continues today. The sons of a top-flight Seattle attorney and a University of Washington librarian, they developed the commercial software business and leveraged control of the PC operating system to dominate application after application, leading to later legal fights.

Today, Microsoft remains one of the region's major employers. If seen as a bit faded before platform giants such as Apple and Google, it is still ubiquitous in software, and runs one of the world's three major web clouds. Like Boeing, one of Microsoft's largest customers is the Department of Defense. Its backdoor connections to National Security Administration surveillance were exposed by Edward Snowden.

If we thought Microsoft was out to take over everything back in the 1990s and 2000s, we hadn't seen anything yet. The other major Seattle tech giant, Amazon, not only seeks to dominate the market, but to be the market, ruling e-commerce and the entire retail supply chain from books to food. Its progenitor, Jeff Bezos, seems out to rule Earth and space.

Growing two miles south of my home, Amazon has devoured Seattle. In 2010 the company had around 5,000 employees in the area. Today it has 75,000. No city is more dominated by a single employer. Amazon's headquarters complex spawls in buildings across South Lake Union. A little over a decade ago it was an area of supply shops and car dealerships. In a stunning urban transformation, it has turned into a new downtown, an ultramodern cluster of low-rise office buildings and skyscrapers. Google and Facebook have outposts here employing thousands. Cranes continue to rise above new construction that continues apace.

Today Amazon, like Microsoft, is a fully integrated element of the national security complex. Amazon Web Services, the largest cloud, operates networks for the intelligence

complex including CIA, and is joined with Microsoft to put the Department of Defense on the cloud. The tech giants are coming home to the mothership. The Department of War, when they called it for what it really is, funded the first electronic digital computer that could be programmed and used for general purposes, ENIAC at the University of Pennsylvania fired up in 1945. IBM's first mainframe computer was funded by the Pentagon to manage the nuclear alert system. Military microchip purchases brought prices down to where they could gain civilian applications. The Pentagon paved the way for the guys in garages.

A center of miltary empire

If incestuous relations with the military characterize all three of these Seattle corporate giants, the Puget Sound region surrounding Seattle is site to one of the greatest concentrations of military power on the planet. (As if to underscore the point, as I write these words I hear the screeching roar of Navy F-18s flying overhead, the Blue Angels aerobatic team buzzing Seattle in their annual Seafair festival appearance.)

Joint Base Lewis McCord south of Tacoma is the largest Army base in the U.S. west of the Mississippi, running Army operations throughout the Pacific. A jumping off point for operations across Asia, JBLM is home to a large contingent of C-17 air freighters. Along I-5 one can often see processions of Army vehicles headed out to practice desert warfare at the Yakima Firing Range in the dry rainshadow east of the Cascades. During the height of deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, one could often tell when units were being rotated back to the States by increased traffic clogs on I-5 between Tacoma and Olympia. It is also the second largest Joint Special Operations Command base, and a site for testing advanced military concepts. The highly mobile Stryker brigades began here.

The Navy is also a looming presence across the region, underscoring why the U.S. insisted on the 49th parallel in its division of the Oregon Territory with the British, giving it control of the Puget Sound. From the start a maritime empire with a continental interior, the U.S. always saw the Sound, along with San Francisco Bay and Coronado Bay around San Diego, as crucial ports for projecting power and commerce into the Pacific. Today, across the Sound from Seattle at Bremerton, Naval Base Kitsap is home to the two Nimitz-class nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, and a major naval shipyard servicing nuclear vessels. This is where battleships damaged in the Pearl Harbor attack were restored to service. At the north end of the Sound, Whidbey Island Naval Air Station is a key center of electronic warfare and spy plane operations.

The Navy has a number of other assets and facilities on the Sound, including homeports for guided missile destroyers and attack submarines, fuel and weapons depots, and one of the Navy's two centers providing technical and engineering support for its sub fleet.

"Auschwitz on the Puget Sound"

Transcending all the other Navy installations for its apocalyptic level of destructive power is Naval Base Kitsap's submarine port at Bangor 20 miles west of Seattle. One of two bases for Trident nuclear missile submarines – The other is in Georgia – the location was chosen because the boomers could easily submerge in the deep, ice-age-glacier-cut Hood Canal and sneak out into the Sound to enforce their threat of total nuclear destruction. I was once told by a Puget Sound fisherman how a large wave sweeping under his boat was the only sign a Trident was going out. His fish sonar showed nothing.

The *Seattle Times* reported, "Nearly one-quarter of America's 9,962 nuclear weapons are now assigned to the Bangor submarine base on Hood Canal, 20 air miles northwest of downtown Seattle . . . This makes Bangor the largest nuclear weapons storehouse in the United States, and possibly the world." The stockpile includes warheads for the eight ballistic missile submarines and reserves stored in bunkers.

From my house, looking west to the jagged chain of the Olympic Mountains, I am often struck by the potential for universal holocaust that sits in between. The nuclear firepower one Trident is capable of carrying would alone be enough to create a nuclear winter that would block sunlight and hinder food production, killing billions by starvation. The entire Bangor fleet could end complex life on Planet Earth. Even a very limited counterforce war, weapons taking out weapons, would also take out me and my hometown. They say the survivors would envy the dead. I would likely be one of the envied, if not from immediate blast effects, then from the cloud of fallout that would smother Seattle.

Former Seattle Catholic Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen called the base "Auschwitz on the Puget Sound." He withheld part of his taxes in protest and advocated that others do that as well. His Trident opposition and other offenses, such as support for gay rights, divorced Catholics and contraception, drew an investigation from Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the modern papal inquisitor who was a onetime Hitler Youth member and later Pope Benedict. Hunthausen was stripped of some of his powers. He retired in 1991 but before he died in 2018 lived long enough to see his old nemesis forced to resign and be succeeded by Francis.

Beyond the global

Seattle is a hotbed of bioregional thinking, with many who identify as Cascadians seeking a new way of life beyond empire and more in tune with the Earth. But, as this review has shown, it is also a center of empire. Seattle and its surroundings not only encompass several of the world's premier globalizing corporations, but also one of the major concentrations of U.S. military power, including the instrumentalities for the world's final destruction should humanity be so foolish as to unleash them.

Facing this array of the global on the local landscape, what can be the meaning of a bioregional future? What does it mean to grow a bioregional life in this center of corporate and military empire? For the empire is certainly here in multiple and highly potent forms. Is a way of life beyond the empire possible here? That is what we must ask, and seek to envision.

Perhaps a clue is in the emergent name for the body of water that includes the Puget Sound and Georgia Strait to the north, the Salish Sea. Proposed decades ago by bioregionalists as an alternative name reflecting the native history of the place, rather than the names given by imperial explorers, the Salish Sea has now been adopted as an official designation. Hearkening to the native roots before empire is a way to begin seeing beyond empire. Even as the global continues to powerfully exist here, we can break beyond its mental confines to make a home place rooted in bioregional nature. It requires acts of revolutionary imagination to make that place. The future starts in our hearts and minds.

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