

# Greenland Redux: Trump and America's Continuing Obsession

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*History shows that empires acquire territories in various ways. Dynasties link arms through marriage, as the Habsburgs were famous for doing. Territories are pinched by means of arms or stolen through sham contracts and undertakings. They might also be purchased.*

The United States made much of the vast property sale in acquiring an empire. The Louisiana purchase of 1803 for a mere \$15 million was daring, opportunistic and extra-legal. It was also initiated by a US president who had romantically insisted that the fledgling republic confine itself to the agricultural good deeds of a model yeomanry. But Thomas Jefferson could be cunningly devilish, and France, then under the firm rule of Napoleon Bonaparte, [worried him](#). "There is on the globe one single spot, the possessor of which is our natural and habitual enemy. It is New Orleans."

Boney, his interests more focused on Europe, was open to giving up the land for a fee. The natives, naturally, were not consulted. Jefferson, having previously advocated the need to observe the Constitution with pious dedication, ignored it on the issue of purchasing territory, there being no allowance for it in the document. And so the first signs of the imperial presidency showed.

In 1868, the hungry eye of US officialdom showed that conquering and controlling the continent was not merely a matter of westward expansion that would eventually see, in the [lofty observation](#) of Frederick Jackson Turner, its closing. Acquisitive desires pointed to Iceland and Greenland as possible eastward options.

A 1868 [publication](#) for the US State Department compiled by Benjamin Mills Peirce takes more than a fleeting interest in the resources of Iceland and Greenland, acknowledging the treaty with Denmark which was intended to cede control of the Caribbean islands of St. Thomas and St. John to the US. The 1868 report encouraged the acquisition of Greenland for two important reasons: commercial opportunities arising from exploiting the natural abundance of "whale, walrus, seal, and shark, cod, ivory-cod, salmon, salmon-trout, and herring" and the political soundness of attaining a territory flanking "British America on the Arctic and Pacific". Greenland could thereby "become a part of the American Union" and diminish British influence in the area.

The treaty with Denmark concerning the Danish West Indies was a reminder that things were not going to be smooth. The acquisition of what would become the US Virgin Islands was the brainchild of Secretary of State William Henry Seward, a move seen by the US State Department as admirably benign. The treaty's fate was chequered: initial rejection by the US Senate, directed mostly at Seward's support for President Andrew Jackson during his impeachment proceedings, followed by Danish rejection in 1902. There was also some

rancour about whether a plebiscite would be held for local inhabitants, given Danish fears about what would befall the black inhabitants under US rule, one hardly famed for its generosity to the swarthy races.

The First World War finally saw the Danish West Indies formally transferred on March 31, 1917, along with \$25 million in gold coin, an outcome assisted in some part by the bullying antics of US Secretary of State Robert Lansing. The Secretary was not shy [in hinting](#) that occupying the islands to prevent them falling into German hands was a distinct possibility.

Interest in acquiring Greenland was further kindled by the Second World War. Again, worries about Germany featured, given its uneventful occupation of Denmark in 1940. The United States subsequently built the Thule Air Base in 1943. The Truman administration, at the conclusion of the war, failed to bait the Danes with a purchase price of \$100 million, though the base continued to function under US control and the kingdom's blessing.

During **President Donald Trump's** first term, the purchase obsession resurfaced like an itch, with any acquisition of Greenland [being likened](#) to a "large real estate deal." Denmark, he advised, carried it "at a great loss. And strategically for the United States, it would be nice." By most accounts, this had less to do with realpolitik than real estate. According to Peter Baker and Susan Glasser's [account](#) of Trump's first term, Denmark would receive the benighted territory of Puerto Rico in the exchange. They also suggest that the cheeky proposal came from the president's longtime friend Ronald Lauder, heir to the Estée Lauder cosmetics empire. Typically, Trump insists it was all his idea.

Trump subsequently found the Danish **Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen** unimpressed, unwilling, and "nasty". For her part, the Danish PM had [decided](#) that "the time when you buy and sell other countries and populations is over. Let's leave it there."

Trump's imminent return to the White House has revived old idiosyncrasies. Over the holiday period in December 2024, [he had moments](#) of Jeffersonian fancy, promising to take over the Panama Canal, which he regarded as being operated illegally, albeit lovingly, by "the wonderful soldiers of China", turning Canada into the 51<sup>st</sup> State with former hockey professional Wayne Gretzky installed as governor, and purchasing Greenland.

The president-elect's choice of US ambassador to Denmark is seemingly premised on wooing Copenhagen, with Trump declaring Washington's ownership of the territory "an absolute necessity." The [views](#) of Greenland's Prime Minister Múte Egede suggest that such a project is unlikely to succeed. "Greenland is ours. We are not for sale and will never be for sale." It's dangerous to be so unequivocal in the field of politics.

In April last year, the Thule Air Base was renamed the Pituffik Space Base in a fit of advertised cultural sensitivity. The Department of Defense [claimed](#) that this better recognised "Greenlandic cultural heritage" and more appropriately reflected "its role in the US Space Force." Greenlandic cultural heritage otherwise plays little role in the imperial vision of the base, with the US Space Force [insisting](#) that it "enables Space Superiority", performing missile warning, missile defence roles, and space surveillance missions.

In the scheme of things, owning Greenland in any official sense hardly matters, and the second Trump administration would be wise to just let the Danes deal with the icy mass and its incumbent problems. Washington already has what it needs - and more besides.

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