



THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF
WASHINGTON 25, D. C.

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21 January 1955

MEMORANDUM FOR THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

Subject: Possible Acquisition of Greenland by the
United States.

1. In response to your memorandum dated 21 December 1954, subject as above, the Joint Chiefs of Staff submit herewith their views in regard to the strategic importance of Greenland and as to whether it would be to the military advantage of this country to acquire title to this area.

2. Geographically, Greenland is a part of the Western Hemisphere and has long been so regarded by the United States. After the German invasion of Denmark in April of 1940, the status of Greenland became a matter of serious concern to our government. The position of the United States with respect to Greenland, at that time, is reflected in a letter from the Secretary of State to the Danish Minister in connection with the negotiation of an agreement relating to its defense:

"... Greenland is within the area embraced by the Monroe Doctrine and by the Act of Havana, with which you are familiar, and its defense against attack by a non-American power is plainly essential to the preservation of the peace and security of the American continent, and of the traditional policies of this Government respecting the Western Hemisphere."

3. When the United States became an active belligerent in World War II, military bases and other facilities established in Greenland achieved new importance, primarily in connection with convoy activities, the antisubmarine campaign, air transport and ferrying operations, signal communications, and weather forecasting. U.S. bases in Greenland, Iceland and the Azores contributed largely to our ability to project and sustain forces of the magnitude required for victory in Europe.

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4. Toward the end of the war, the President approved a determination of the Joint Chiefs of Staff that the postwar retention of military base rights in Greenland was essential to the security of the United States. It was not until 1951, however, that the United States was able to conclude a new bilateral treaty with the Kingdom of Denmark, which constitutes the basis of our present military rights in Greenland. This treaty, negotiated under the aegis of the NATO, is intended to remain in effect for the duration of the NATO.

5. In any general war now foreseeable, control by the Allies of sea and air lines of communications between the United States and Europe is no less essential than in World War II. The importance of military facilities in Greenland to the accomplishment of such an undertaking has already been made evident.



6. In the light of the Soviet-Communist threat to Free World security and in this age of shrinking distances and atomic potentials, Greenland has progressively assumed greater strategic importance to the United States. For the first time, the United States must now be prepared to defend against a surprise attack of possibly crippling proportions at the outset of war and to retaliate promptly and effectively with all means at its disposal. Greenland, lying athwart the most direct air routes between the United States and the USSR, can provide sites for distant early warning as well as bases for offensive air operations.

7. The problem of providing an adequate continental air defense is occupying the joint attention of Canada and the United States. A Joint U.S.-Canadian Location Study Group is now engaged in surveying a route for a distant early warning net along the Arctic approaches to the American continent. While their survey is not yet complete, their preliminary report indicates that a requirement for radar sites in Greenland, from HOLSTEINBORG eastward across the icecap may be developed.

8. Greenland also figures in the planned operations of the Strategic Air Command. The large U.S. Air Force base at Thule provides an intermediate staging area for continental and Alaskan-based units of that command. Further, as a base for refueling aircraft, Thule would facilitate nonstop two-way strike missions which will permit these units to be maintained

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on U.S. soil. If the more forward air bases were to be denied the United States, either through loss to the enemy or through restrictions placed upon their use by our Allies, the importance of Greenland to the air offensive would increase correspondingly.

9. As to whether it would be to the military advantage of the United States to acquire title to Greenland, the Joint Chiefs of Staff believe it to be axiomatic that sovereignty provides the firmest basis of assuring that a territory and its resources will be available for military use when needed. United States sovereignty over Greenland would remove any doubt as to the unconditional availability of bases and would avoid the uncertainty which attends the occasional necessity for renegotiating agreements which, as in the case of Iceland, is at times inhibitory to the orderly development of facilities programs. In this connection, it is generally agreed that the security of the United States has never before depended so largely on the maintenance in time of peace of ready forces, deployed and provisioned for their wartime role.

10. Although the essential requirements of the United States for base rights are for the present adequately provided for in the 1951 treaty so long as Denmark remains a cooperative partner in an effective NATO, the Joint Chiefs of Staff are of the opinion based on purely military grounds that there would be an advantage to this country in acquiring title to Greenland. However, they recognize that there are political and economic problems involved which they are not in a position to assess.

For the Joint Chiefs of Staff:



Arthur Radford

ARTHUR RADFORD,
Chairman,
Joint Chiefs of Staff.

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