

## AN EMERGING WORLD POWER

**Biography**

William Seward, statesman, abolitionist, cabinet member, and lifelong public servant, is best remembered for his role in the purchase of Alaska. ♦ *As you read, think about the lasting impact that Seward had on his country. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

**William Seward (1801–1872)**

William Seward, a New Yorker born in 1801, held many roles in government. He began serving under President Abraham Lincoln as secretary of state in 1861. In 1865, on the night that Lincoln was assassinated, a conspirator with John Wilkes Booth stabbed Seward in the throat. Seward recovered and continued his role as secretary of state under President Andrew Johnson until 1869. His most important act during this time was his purchase of Alaska.

Seward saw potential in Alaska as early as 1860 and refused to give up on his desire to increase the size of the United States. Buying this land would almost double the size of the United States. In 1867, Seward and the Russian minister to the United States stayed awake until 4 a.m. to work out the final deal for the United States to buy 586,412 square miles for \$7.2 million, which was equivalent to \$94 million in 2005. Essentially, Seward purchased the land that is now the state of Alaska for about two cents per acre.

Seward still had to persuade both the Senate and the House of Representatives to accept the deal. Seward faced opposition not only from Congress but also from Americans who questioned the need for large tracts of land unconnected to the continental United States. Many people

wondered what good could come from such a frozen wasteland. Seward was ridiculed in the press. Public outrage against the deal was so strong that both senators and representatives, concerned about their political futures, worried about voting in favor of it.

Despite public and political pressure, Seward persisted, and the Russian minister actually bribed members of Congress to ensure that they voted for the deal. Finally, in July 1868 the United States purchased Alaska. Seward, however, died in 1869, well before Americans realized the importance of his purchase.

In 1872, gold was discovered in Alaska and over the years, oil, fish, and lumber in Alaska have become major exports. In 1959, Alaska became the forty-ninth state. Tourists visit Alaska every year to experience the natural beauty and wildlife of this diverse region. Alaskan national parks cover millions of acres of land. Despite these benefits, transportation difficulties cause Alaska to remain a largely untapped resource for the United States.

This developing region has not forgotten the impact of William Seward. Alaska celebrates Seward's Day on the last Sunday in March. Although many people doubted Seward, his purchase has turned out to be much more than just an icebox.



William Seward,  
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**Questions to Think About**

1. What deal did Seward and the Russian minister develop?
2. What benefits have arisen from Seward's idea to purchase Alaska?
3. **Link Past and Present** If the U.S. Congress were buying Alaska today, how might the use of modern technology affect that purchase?