

# OPINION

**COMPASS:** *Points of view from the community*

## It's time to ratify Law of the Sea treaty



*Ratification of the Law of Sea treaty will create opportunity for Alaska. It will require research and stimulate new education needs. Most importantly, it will demand that we all think of the future*

**By George Newton**

In 1982, the United Nations completed work on a treaty called U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea. The United States objected to the original treaty and during renegotiation in 1994 gained agreement on changes to those parts to which we objected.

As with all treaties, after negotiation and signing the treaty was submitted to the Senate for its "advice and consent." The Law of the Sea treaty went to the Senate nine years ago, where for several reasons nothing happened.

Now it appears that things are about to change. Sen. Richard Lugar, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, held

two hearings in October, then stated his goal was to present a letter of advice and consent to the president early in 2004.

More than 140 nations have ratified the treaty. The treaty is wide-ranging, and it is clearly in the interests of the United States to ratify. Our nation is surrounded by three oceans. The oceans are an integral part of the lives of every American.

Alaska, with more than half the coastline of the United States, could well be profoundly affected by ratification in the generations ahead. But the time is now for Alaskans to start thinking about changes that will be facilitated by the treaty.

The first witness to

testify before the Foreign Relations Committee last October was Sen. Ted Stevens, who testified in favor of ratification.

What are the challenges and opportunities that may well be presented Alaskans in the later years of the 21st century?

They all center about the changing climate and the extended periods of access to the Arctic Ocean and the Bering Sea. With less ice come both concerns and opportunities. They center around international security, national security, marine transportation, economic development and diplomacy.

International security is a growing concern everywhere. Alaska has the

only U.S. coastline on the Arctic Ocean. It is more than 1,000 miles long and sparsely populated. This provides numerous locations for illegal entry, drug trafficking and other terrorist activity. Counters to this vulnerability might come in several forms: increased presence, increased surveillance.

As the Arctic Ocean becomes more accessible by non-ice-strengthened ships, it becomes another ocean that must be protected. The United States, as the world's last superpower, must assume that role. That means the Navy must build ships that can operate in free-floating ice and extreme cold weather. That means the Coast Guard should establish a real Arctic Ocean presence. Failure to take such steps will cede control of the Arctic to whichever nation chooses to assume it.

Naturally, a more accessible Arctic will mean increased intercontinental maritime shipping. The

journey between Seattle and Hamburg, using the Arctic Ocean route, is 40 percent shorter than the routes through either of the canals. Extending the shipping season using ice-strengthened ships could demand conventional cargo exchange facilities, where cargo can be transferred between ice-strengthened and conventional ships. Ports such as Adak or Dutch Harbor come to mind.

Ratification of the Law of the Sea treaty will have the greatest effect on economic development in Alaska. After conducting the required ocean bottom surveys, the United States will be able to extend the outer limits of its continental shelf and claim the resources on or under the sea floor on the Chukchi Cap in the Arctic and the "doughnut hole" in the Bering Sea. Some estimate that the area gained will be as much as one-half the size of Alaska. The fossil fuel potential of these areas is unknown but

will be evaluated carefully.

On the diplomatic front, completing the surveys with Canada could also provide data for creation of an agreed Arctic Ocean maritime boundary between our countries.

Ratification of the Law of Sea treaty will create opportunity for Alaska. It will require research and stimulate new education needs. Most importantly, it will demand that we all think of the future, well beyond the horizon of two to six years normally used in our country. Though changes in the Arctic may occur over generations, properly preparing will take decades. Truly, the future is now.

George Newton is serving his second term as chair of the U.S. Arctic Research Commission. He is a retired Navy captain and a former nuclear submarine commander and has long been a supporter of research in Alaska. He lives in McLean, Va.