In the 50s, 60s and 70s the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) set its sights on Alaska as a US based test site for potential peaceful applications of nuclear weapons. Alaska was chosen as for several reasons “the area was distant from population centers…[and] Alaska was regarded as an empty wasteland suitable for bombing ranges, dump sites for toxic wastes, and testing grounds for potentially hazardous technologies” (O’Neil p180). The first location chosen was Amchitka, a “low, rainy, foggy, windy, 42-mile-long by 4.5 mile-wide strip of land” that no one had lived on for over 200 years, located closer to Japan and Russia than the continental US (Ross p110, Coates p20). This spot was choose and approved by the president in the 1950s, although was not used for tests until the 1960s (O’Neil p180). The other location selected for nuclear testing, what became named Project Chariot, was “Ogotoruk Creek, 30 miles southeast of Point Hope and 40 miles northwest of Kivalina” (Ross p96). However, of these two locations only one site ever saw nuclear testing become a reality, Amchitka. The reason Amchitka plans went ahead despite conversationalist protests and Chariot plans did not, was Amchitka’s “physical and psychological remoteness” and the lack of biological information about the area (Ross, p 116).

The difference between the Ogotoruk Creek and Amchitka is that the Ogotoruk Creek was not as remote as previously believed. Based in Point Hope, 30 miles northwest of the creek, lived a 300-person Inupiat Village that had subsisted on the land and sea of the area for centuries. The Ogotoruk Creek was part of their hunting grounds and the proposed harbor would not only ruin that land but also impact the sea life in the surrounding area (Sierra Club Bulletin p8). In contrast Amchitka had no permanent residence for over 200 years and was very difficult to get to due to kelp beds and harsh weather (Coates 1996 p20). Being so isolated made it near impossible to get to therefore making support harder to generate since so little was known about the island except that it was a wildlife reserve and near several fault lines (Coates 1996 p21).
Biologically speaking, more research and surveys were conducted in the Ogotoruk Creek area than in Amchitka, therefore more was known about the potentially damaging effects nuclear blasts would create. For Project Chariot the AEC organized several teams of scientist to go out and do surveys to gather data that could be used to assure the public that negative effects would be minimal (Sierra Club Bulletin p5). In contrast, “the AEC conducted no pretest biological review” on Amchitka (Ross p112). The information gathered in Ogotoruk Creek provided the public with physical evidence of potential consequences to the environment. Although these same threats existed on Amchitka, they were less real because extensive studies were not completed and the island was so far away and uninhabited, except by potentially overpopulated otters and other animals, that the concerns were not at the forefront of the majority of public (Ross p111). Even more important on Amchitka than the lack of studies was the fact that the environment had been violated before (Ross p110). Alaska Conservation Society member Robert Weeden noted in 1969 noted that “If[the] AEC must be in Alaska, they do less harm on Amchitka than on untouched islands or in the Artic” (Coates 1996 p28).

It was the combination of physical remoteness and uncertainty biologically that lead to Amchitka being approved and Project Chariot failing. The need for additional time to review the minimal amount of evidence that has been gathered is what caused three justices to dissent when the nuclear test litigation went in front of the Supreme Court, allowing the AEC to proceed as planned (Kohlhoff p108). Had the island been more accessible to non-AEC groups to conduct biological studies, more evidence would have been available to the justices to make an informed decision. It was the combination of Amchitka’s isolation with the lack of biological information that allowed nuclear testing to proceed.
Guns and Money

Since its discovery, the landscape of Alaska has been shaped by continuous modification and development. Projects ranging in size from “bridges to nowhere” to massive dams and 800-mile pipelines have been proposed. While the characteristics of these projects were often unique, successful projects in Alaska commonly provided national security or economic promise. Satisfying at least one of these criteria has historically been crucial for the support and ultimate success of a project in Alaska. In the 1960’s and 70’s, the atomic age came to Alaska and two significant projects were proposed. The first, Project Chariot, was proposed in 1958 and aimed to excavate a harbor using nuclear blasts. The second project involved underground nuclear testing on the remote island of Amchitka from 1965 to 1971. After being met with substantial opposition, Project Chariot suffered numerous delays and revisions until it was ultimately abandoned. In contrast, the blasting on Amchitka proceeded as planned, despite receiving similar opposition. Because of the goals of improving national security, the Atomic Energy Commission was successful in testing on Amchitka Island. By comparison, Project Chariot was unsuccessful due to its lack of economic promise and irrelevance to national security.

Due to its proximity to Asia, Alaska has continually been a concern of national security for America. This concern has historically generated great motivation for the undertaking of massive projects in Alaska. Prior to World War II, despite many Alaskan leaders demands for a highway connecting the state to the lower forty-eight, progress was slow and proposals were often overlooked or ignored. But, “With the arrival of the Second World War, Alaskans began to promote the highway by drawing attention to Alaska’s pivotal role in national defense.” (Coates, 1993, p.67). It was a concern for national security in Alaska that provided the force to build the
Alcan Highway and it was a concern for national security that prompted “the biggest commercial airlifts in American history” (Coates, 1993, p.76) to organize the construction of fifty radar stations across 3000 miles of the arctic for the DEWline project. This same concern for national security was used to provide support for the nuclear testing on Amchitka:

“Supporters later promoted it (Amchitka nuclear testing) as protection for U.S.-based Minuteman missile sites, but an improved, lower-yield warhead would be ready in time to meet a potential Soviet threat.” (Ross, 2000, p.114)

It was through the emphasis on national security that the Atomic Energy Commission was able to successfully test nuclear weapons on the island of Amchitka.

Of the two criteria for a successful project in Alaska, Project Chariot satisfied neither. Despite the use of nuclear warheads, the project had no goals involving national security. In order to be a success, the project had to prove its economic promise:

“Teller appealed to the desire for economic expansion” and “…claimed the harbor would open the way to the development of vast coal deposits as well as valuable oil resources inland” (Ross, 2000, p.100)

But despite their attempts, supporters were unsuccessful in advertising the economic gains involved with the project. “The economic unfeasibility of the harbor idea casued the AEC to rethink Project Chariot” (Ross, 2000, p. 99) and “…when asked about the financing of infrastructure, Teller switched the subject to souvenirs.” (Ross, 2000, p. 97). AEC chairman John McCon was quoted saying, “we couldn’t find a customer for the harbor.” (Ross, 2000, p. 99). Project Chariot’s lack of support and ultimate failure was due to its irrelevance to national security and its empty economic promise.

The state of Alaska has harbored some of the greatest and boldest successes in development and engineering. Support for these projects clearly stems from two common themes: national security and economic promise. Simplified, in order for a large project to be successful in Alaska, it must generate guns or money. Amchitka was successful because it provided guns, while Project Chariot was unsuccessful because it provided neither.
Around the 1960’s and into the 1970’s, two projects pertaining to nuclear explosives in Alaska were proposed by the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), one being Project Chariot and the other Amchitka. While the tests at Amchitka, a remote island on the Aleutian Chain, were followed through as planned, Project Chariot did not occur. Although there are many reasons why Project Chariot was not carried out while the Amchitka tests were executed as planned, the main reason relates to Native title regarding the areas in which the respective tests were set to take place.

Project Chariot was part of Operation Plowshare, “an effort to find nonmilitary purposes for nuclear explosives” (Ross, 2002, p. 98). This project, beginning in 1958, was meant to carry out underground nuclear explosions with hopes of applying the knowledge gained to possible excavation of harbors and canals by nuclear means (Ross, 2002). In order to conduct large-scale nuclear experiments, it was necessary that the site chosen was located in a remote area. In turn, the AEC set their sights on a section in northwest Alaska, specifically Ogoturuk Creek, around Cape Thompson. Natives from nearby villages Point Hope and Kivalina, in addition to others, petitioned to the Interior Department’s Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Even though the approximate 40 square miles had already been relinquished to the AEC by the BLM, this petition proved to be of consequence. During a Native political conference, “delegates denounced the permit the BLM had issued to the AEC for the use of Cape Thompson as a violation of legally recognized aboriginal land rights and demanded its revocation” (p. 126). This was the tip of the iceberg in the nullification of Project Chariot. As the Alaska Native settlements had yet to materialize in the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANSCA) this area still fell legally under Native title. An aide to Interior Department Secretary Steward Udall, whom had been in contact
with the Native groups, said that rather than have the Interior issue a counter-report to the
President, the “AEC withdrew early in the fray, and in the most face-saving manner” (p. 127).

Dissimilarly, Amchitka, an island in the Aleutian chain of Alaska that was also chosen
for nuclear tests by the AEC around late 1963 into early 1964 was not held under the same
Native title: a result of a clause in the Aleutian Islands Reserve which permitted the use of
certain lands for military purposes. As a result, the tests at Amchitka could be executed even
with the presence of opposition, while Project Chariot could not.

The AEC chose Amchitka Island for underground nuclear tests, because of its isolated
location as well as its history of military occupation. During WWII Amchitka had been used as a
pseudo-base following the Japanese seizure of the islands Attu and Kiska. The “AEC found the
geology favorable” for the “[...] abandoned airstrips could be rehabilitated, and a clause in the
executive order creat(ed) the Aleutian Islands Reserve (which) permitted its use for military
purposes” (Ross, 2002, p. 110). Since the land had already been used for military purposes, it
was considered damaged. An official from the AEC was quoted as saying, “people can talk
about the ‘Rape of Amchitka’ all they want to, the fact is, Amchitka has been raped before”
(Coates, 1996, p. 22). The tests received resistance from the environmental, political, and
international spectrum. With disregard to opposition regarding the third and last test, Cannikin,
President Nixon gave his approval. Cannikin was set off on November 6, 1971.

The clause in the Aleutian Islands Reserve, which allowed Amchitka to be relinquished
for military purposes, is precisely what separated Project Chariot from the tests at Amchitka and
allowed President Nixon to provide the go-ahead. This exception is the reason why tests
occurred at Amchitka while Project Chariot dissolved into nothing.