

Governing Alaska

The Constitutional Convention

The Alaska-Tennessee Plan

While serving in the U.S. Navy during World War II, George Lehleitner of Louisiana read a book about how the democracies of the world could join together to deal with political extremism.

Upon his return to the States, he developed the belief that the United States could help lead the way by admitting Alaska and Hawaii to the Union. This act would show how it is possible to get along with people who are separated by great distances.

Lehleitner went on to devote more than a dozen years to a personal crusade to help win statehood for Alaska and Hawaii. He traveled at his own expense to Alaska, Hawaii and Washington, D.C. and spread his message with speeches, letters and personal contacts.

As part of his research, he learned about a technique that Tennessee had used to win admission to the Union. The basic idea was to elect a Congressional delegation and send its members to Washington, D.C., hoping for recognition by Congress. Southeast Alaskans had made similar efforts in the late 19th century, choosing unofficial delegates to Congress.

Lehleitner drove to Fairbanks to pitch his idea and found a willing ally in C.W. Snedden, publisher of the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner, who played up the so-called "Alaska-Tennessee Plan." Through Lehleitner's work, the delegates unanimously approved the idea of electing an unofficial representative and two senators.

The voters of the territory endorsed the idea and chose Democrats Ralph Rivers, William Egan and Ernest Gruening as the Alaska-Tennessee Plan delegation. They brought gifts for President Eisenhower and his wife that included ivory carvings, smoked salmon and "Arctic Scent" cologne. They began to lobby Congress and the press.

A friendly senator introduced them in the Senate gallery on January 14, 1957. A dozen senators spoke in favor of statehood for Alaska, leading Gruening to write that the events of that day "far exceeded our hopes and expectations."

One Congressional statehood opponent, termed the election of the three men as illegal, presumptuous and "a brazen attempt to coerce Congress," but most of the reaction was not so negative. "We were early informed, however, that if we got statehood, we would have to run again," Gruening wrote in his autobiography. "As all three of the men Alaska sent to Washington were Democrats, the Republicans understandably took that position, although that had not been required of earlier 'Tennessee Plan' states. But as

insistence on maintaining our status would have jeopardized our objective, we agreed that statehood legislation would so provide."

While Rivers would go on to be Alaska's first member of the U.S. House and Gruening won election to the U.S. Senate, Egan became Alaska's first elected governor. Joining Gruening in the Senate would be Bartlett, the other leading advocate for statehood. A coin toss determined that Bartlett would be addressed as the "senior" senator and Gruening would be known as the junior, though at age 71 he was 17 years older than Bartlett.

Courtesy of the Alaska Humanities Forum