

At 156°W

The Alaska Territorial Guard as a Solution to Arctic Capacity and Domain Awareness

LTC JEFF HAYES, US ARMY

DR. JOHN PENNINGTON

Abstract

Despite the rapidly growing importance of the Arctic in economic, defense, and environmental sectors, the United States, though an Arctic nation, lacks meaningful defense capacity in the Arctic region. This article provides a brief history of the critical role that Alaska Natives played in the Arctic during World War II, first as the Alaska Territorial Guard and later as formally incorporated units of the Alaska Army National Guard, and how these units addressed in their time the same capability gaps facing the United States today. However, Army reorganization during the Global War on Terror has had the unintended effect of making National Guard service nearly impossible for this critical population. The article further proposes that the Canadian Ranger program could serve as a model for restoring military service as a possibility for Alaska Natives while providing a cost-effective means of addressing domain awareness and other shortfalls confronting the United States.

War plagues Europe. The ironically named “Pacific” (for peaceful) is fast becoming the playground of an Asian competitor with Arctic ambitions and scant deterrence. Most of America’s active-duty forces are ill-equipped for service in the far north, and few in uniform have visited, much less conducted military operations, above the Arctic Circle or west of Anchorage. Politicians agree that Alaska is strategically important, yet the criticality fades to niche-interest status when prioritized against more pressing, more visible demands. The United States military in Alaska lacks essential capabilities, capacities, interoperability, and domain awareness. This scene unfolded in September 1941.

Three months prior to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the lone battalion comprising the entire Alaska National Guard, 1st Battalion, 297th Infantry Regiment, was federalized and dispatched to the “lower 48” in anticipation of the war that was sure to come.¹ Suddenly bereft of any means of self-defense, the Alaska Territorial Guard (ATG), known colloquially as the “Eskimo Scouts” and the “Tundra Army,” emerged

¹ Conrad.F. Necrason, “Epilogue,” in *Men of the Tundra: Alaska Eskimos at War*, Muktuk Marston (New York: October House Inc., 1969), 214, <https://archive.org/>.

as a stopgap measure authorized by the War Department at the behest of territorial governor Ernest Gruening, and under the enthusiastic direction of Maj Marvin “Muktuk” Marston, US Army Air Corps.² From 1942 to 1947, a cadre of 3,000 civilian volunteers, predominantly comprised of Alaska Natives, constituted a steadfast, reliable paramilitary presence in their traditional lands. These isolated areas contained few non-Natives, and federal troops were largely unknown to Indigenous residents. Their accepted mission was simple: “Defend the land west of the 156th parallel (sic).”³ They were specifically charged with reporting any instances of enemy espionage or unusual occurrences. Additionally, the men and women of the ATG served as liaisons to the military forces beginning to expand north and west as the nation gained its war footing. They also provided search-and-rescue services to lend-lease pilots, augmented military maps with unparalleled detail, and ensured consistent military communication through the utilization of traditional dog sled teams and amateur radio. They elected their own leaders, possessed unmatched expertise in their immediate geographical locales, and provided an enduring presence regardless of outside circumstances or shifting federal priorities. In essence, this Indigenous-based organization, the ATG of World War II, addressed nearly every capability gap that still confronts the United States in the Arctic today. If the ATG were to be reconstituted, it is not unreasonable to postulate that it could perform the same functions as it did then.⁴

The Homeland Security Operational Analysis Center (HSOAC) at RAND Corporation, in its *Report on the Arctic Capabilities of the U.S. Armed Forces*, reported that the “United States has important arctic capability and capacity shortfalls.”⁵ This is unsurprising news to anyone familiar with the Arctic. An important distinction is made in the report’s opening paragraphs, however: “[A] primary limitation for the United States is capacity, rather than capability, to operate in the Arctic. In other words, there is no evidence of other Arctic actors being able to access parts of the Arctic that the United States fundamentally cannot, based on the inventory of U.S. capabilities that are either currently available or planned for in the near term.”⁶ With regard to specific urgent needs, the study highlighted six categories for immediate consideration:

² Necrason, “Epilogue.”

³ Muktuk Marston, *Men of the Tundra* (New York: October House Inc., 1969), inset.

⁴ Thomas Blakeney, “The Security of Alaska and the Tundra Army,” *Military Review* 32, no. 6 (1952): 3–12.

⁵ Abbie Tingstad et al., *Report on the Arctic Capabilities of the Armed Forces* (Santa Monica: Homeland Security Operational Analysis Center, RAND, 1 November 2023), vi, <https://www.rand.org/>.

⁶ Tingstad et al., *Report on the Arctic Capabilities*, vi.

- assets with proximity to support response
- multidomain awareness and communications
- infrastructure for response and logistics
- sufficient cadres of personnel who are trained, current, and proficient with the skills to operate in this harsh environment
- tactics and equipment for low-probability, high-impact incidents
- the ability to scale presence.⁷

In practical terms, this conveys that the United States has insufficient “polar-capable assets and trained personnel to ensure enduring presence across the region at scale.”⁸ While this is an accurate military assessment, the report’s observations are too narrowly focused. A search within the document reveals that over the course of 104 pages of otherwise excellent analysis and recommendations, there are no direct references to the traditional inhabitants of this geographic region, the Alaska Natives. Neither there is a notable absence of references to any of the 229 federally recognized Alaska Tribes and their Tribal governments. Additionally, there is a lack of culturally appropriate recognition of any of the distinct cultural groups that comprise Alaska Natives and their more than 20 distinct languages. Words and phrases including the following are not found within the document: Iñupiat, Athabascan/Athabaskan, Yup’ik/Central Yup’ik (Cup’ik), nor Unangax, Alutiiq, Tlingit, Haida, Eyak, or Tsimshian. Put in context, this report fails to acknowledge the enduring presence of 39,000 Alaska Natives who live across the 147,000 square mile combined landmass of the federally recognized Iñupiat Community of the Arctic Slope (ICAS) and the newly formed Yukon-Kuskokwim Regional Tribal Government (YK-RTG)—the very areas at issue in the RAND study. These two regional tribal governments alone account for roughly 25 percent of Alaska’s land surface, half its contiguous coastline, and a total of 65 individual federally recognized tribes.⁹ Without being pedantic, there is likely no more polar-capable asset than the Indigenous men and women who have lived and thrived in the Arctic for millennia. They are climatically native personnel with an enduring presence that outdates our nation’s very existence.

So critical are these communities to our national interests that their involvement rightly constitutes one of the five guiding principles undergirding the 2022

⁷ Tingstad et al., *Report on the Arctic Capabilities*, vi.

⁸ Tingstad et al., *Report on the Arctic Capabilities*, vi.

⁹ Yukon-Kuskokwim Regional Tribal Government, “Our Region,” 2023, <https://ykrtg.org/>; and Inupiat Community of the Arctic Slope, “About Us,” 2024, <https://icas-nsn.gov/>.

US *National Strategy for the Arctic Region*. This document directs federal agencies to consult, coordinate, and comanage operations, activities, and policies in the Arctic with federally recognized Alaska Tribes and their correlating non-Native communities. The United States is committed to regular, meaningful, and robust consultation, coordination, and, as appropriate, co-management with Alaska Tribes and their communities, their post-Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) corporations, and their corresponding tribal organizations—all to ensure inclusion as partners. In effect, this entails involving them in decision-making processes regarding potential actions affecting them, not only out of recognition and respect for the Alaska Native experience and ways of knowing but also because these are essential to the success of the Arctic strategy. The United States has committed to supporting an equitable partnership with Alaska Natives by integrating the coproduction of and knowledge into federal processes while supporting and at times enhancing Tribal self-determination and opportunities.¹⁰

One must ask, then, how the extraordinary capabilities and capacities of Alaska Natives could be completely overlooked by a comprehensive study of US defense gaps in the region? It is not unreasonable to presume the shortcoming falls on American predilection for technological solutions, industrial efficiencies, and perhaps unrecognized, underlying cultural biases. It is a problem worth exploring.

Today, both the Alaska National Guard and Alaska State Defense Force (ASDF) claim to be the modern incarnations of the original Alaska Territorial Guard.¹¹ The ATG's provisional nature was formalized and extended in 1947 through its incorporation as two additional scout battalions of the Alaska Army National Guard (AK ARNG), one along the western coast and one in the north, establishing the "Eskimo Scouts" along the Arctic frontier in presumed perpetuity. Twenty years later, in 1967, Maj Gen C.F. Necrason, the commander of Alaskan Air Command, testified to the success of the project: "Federally owned Armory buildings are now centered in all of the principal villages dotting the north and western coastline of Alaska. . . . Ships, aircraft, fishermen, both friendly and foreign, are all under constant surveillance. . . . The eyes and ears of the Guardsmen are augmented by 37,000 others in the native population along the coast."¹²

This rural presence endured, in largely the same form, for many decades. However, as part of Army modernization efforts in the early 2000s, owing much to guidance in

¹⁰ *National Strategy for the Arctic Region* (Washington: The White House, October 2022), 7, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

¹¹ Alaska National Guard, "History of the Alaska National Guard," n.d., <https://ak.ng.mil/>; and Alaska State Defense Force, "History," 2023, <https://goasdf.com/>.

¹² Necrason, "Epilogue," 215.

the 2006 *Quadrennial Defense Review* to develop an Army National Guard force that was more flexible, more capable, and more rapidly deployable, the AKARNG evolved into a force optimized for counterinsurgency operations in the Middle East and Southwest Asia, at the expense of capabilities optimized for defending Alaska and operations in the Arctic.¹³

The argument was made that the Army's traditional force structure model—i.e., brigades, divisions, and corps, designed for conventional land warfare against peer and near-peer armies—was too complex and ill-suited to the demands of multiple counterinsurgency campaigns around the globe. Rebalancing the ARNG offered the unique opportunity to station complete units (as much as possible) within the borders of a single state. The Alaska-based 207th Infantry Brigade Combat Team (IBCT) for example consisted of subordinate battalions from not only Alaska but also from Arizona, Guam, Nebraska, and New Mexico. Some of these units even had subordinate companies stationed in other states. The IBCT's conversion to a Battlefield Surveillance Brigade enabled the Army to realign the entire brigade in Alaska, concentrated largely in Anchorage and Fairbanks, under the command of the Alaska Adjutant General.¹⁴

Where the reorganization fell short was that, organized as it was for efficiency of command and control, it now regarded more than 60 rural community armories as unnecessary complexities in the ARFORGEN (Army Force Generation) cycle. In a huge, mostly underdeveloped state, where more than 75 percent of armories were not accessible by road, the conclusion was inevitable: unit training assemblies (UTA) became increasingly concentrated in the larger towns and metropolitan areas, travel expenses for individual Guardsmen rose, and attendance and then enlistments slowly fell off.¹⁵ By way of context, the distance between Utqiagvik (formerly Barrow) and Anchorage is more than 700 miles, roughly the distance between Boston, Massachusetts, and Raleigh, North Carolina—but without a road to connect them.

Over the subsequent years, units underwent consolidation, reorganization, renaming, and further consolidation. Soldiers in remote villages found it difficult to travel to the monthly unit training assemblies that used to be held locally or at least within reasonable traveling distances. Since the end of the Cold War, Alaska Natives have gone from having some of the highest rates of military representation to some of the

¹³ "The Rebalance of the Army National Guard," *AUSA Magazine*, January 2008, <https://www.ausa.org/>.

¹⁴ "The Rebalance of the Army National Guard."

¹⁵ Lisa Demer, "In Rural Alaska, a Plan Takes Shape to Rebuild Military Presence," *Anchorage Daily News*, 30 September 2016, <https://www.adn.com/>.

lowest.¹⁶ Today, nearly all of the more than 60 National Guard armories in Alaska's Arctic north and west have been turned over to their rural communities for public use, in large part because the units and Soldiers those armories used to support no longer exist.¹⁷ Even the facilities still remaining at Nome, Kotzebue, and Utqiagvik are underutilized and support far fewer Soldiers than they once did.¹⁸

This shortage of local ARNG units and Soldiers is not a problem entirely created by the AKARNG command structure, but it is one for the AKARNG to confront and address. One National Guardsman put the issue into sharp focus: "A kid who signs a contract may do their entire enlistment and never even make it to drill. With units consolidated in the urban centers, it is expensive and difficult for him to physically get there—in many cases the cost of travel exceeds drill pay. Therefore, they don't show and thus they don't get paid. But they're still paying into SGLI (servicemember's group life insurance) every month, so it is entirely plausible that this Soldier could actually end their term indebted to the government."¹⁹

On the other hand, it would also be naïve to think that some did not take full advantage, deliberately concentrating many sought-after jobs closer to the state's largest city. To the best of my research, there is only one Alaska Native officer remaining in service in the AKARNG, and his current billet at Fort Greely, while a position of meaningful trust and responsibility, can hardly be said to make use of his cultural heritage or tremendous potential for Alaska Native outreach.

In 2020, the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Manpower and Reserve Affairs stated that "the Army must continue to acquire and retain exceptional talent to support its national security role and enhance the total force. As an inclusive organization focused on elite performance, the Army will improve its position as an employer of choice for potential Soldiers and Civilians, and reach untapped communities and agencies where recruiting is less than optimal."²⁰ With 21.9 percent of the state's population identifying as American Indian or Alaska Native, it seems there is an opportunity for the Army to demonstrate real commitment to diversity here in the Arctic by setting achievable, meaningful recruitment goals.²¹

¹⁶ Zachariah Hughes, "A Changing Military Brings Fewer Alaska Natives into the Force," *Alaska Public Media*, 16 November 2018, <https://alaskapublic.org/>.

¹⁷ Gabe Colombo, "Alaska National Guard Turns Over Armories for Public Use," *Alaska Public Media*, 17 July 2018, <https://alaskapublic.org/>.

¹⁸ Demer, "In Rural Alaska a Plan Takes Shape."

¹⁹ Alaska National Guard Soldier, interview with the author, Fairbanks, Alaska, February 2024.

²⁰ *Army People Strategy, DEI Annex* (Washington: The Pentagon, 1 September 2020), 3, <https://www.army.mil/>.

²¹ US Census Bureau, "Alaska: 2020 Census," US Department of Commerce, 25 August 2021, <https://www.census.gov/>.

Then too, the requirements imposed by the modern National Guard Bureau are real barriers to service for many rural Alaskans even were they able to travel freely. Multi-week annual training can be devastating to subsistence lifestyle communities that rely on narrow opportunities for hunting-and-fishing opportunities that pay no heed to modern calendars but obey only the dictates of nature. This devastation is multiplied exponentially with the monthlong or yearlong activations that became so common during the Global War on Terror. High school diplomas, once waived for Alaska Natives, are now a firm requirement. Medical requirements like hearing tests and immunizations are also disqualifying.²²

The ASDF, under the authority of the state governor as an organized militia, has attempted to provide workarounds to these cultural and physical obstacles. However, despite herculean efforts to gain momentum as a movement, the ASDF's total enrollment today is roughly 240 individuals statewide, and even this represents a major increase over recent years. The force has gubernatorial authorization to grow to 500 people, and in areas where strong relationships count for more than advertising dollars, growth of 1–2 volunteers per month is a resounding success for a community-based initiative.²³ Nevertheless, with almost zero funding and a role that is unclear or unheard of by most citizens, it is still a far cry from the high point of the ATG days.

More to the point, even were the ASDF suddenly infused with money, additional personnel, and political clout, it is unlikely to recover those characteristics that marked the ATG as a unique, critical, and cost-effective means of assuring the United States' sovereignty and presence in Alaska's remote coastlines and wilderness. And even were impediments to service reduced or removed, the injured relationship between the Alaska National Guard and some Alaska Native Communities might take a generation or more to repair, under even the best conditions.²⁴ While there are legitimate, objective reasons the Eskimo Scout Battalions were deactivated from the AKARNG, some of these affected communities contain families who have multiple generations of proud military service in their blood. The loss of the privilege to serve can contribute substantially to a loss of identity in many ways. It is, in short, a betrayal of those most able to help the nation in its hour of Arctic need.

Why is the inclusion of Alaska Natives in Alaska's defense such a necessary component of Arctic defense? Because as recognized in early WWII, "the native people

²² Demer, "In Rural Alaska, a Plan Takes Shape."

²³ BG Simon Brown, commander, ASDF, telephone interview with the author, 6 February 2024.

²⁴ John Pennington, "Sovereign Disasters: How Alaska's Tribes Participate in Government-to-Government Relations in a Post-Disaster Environment" (PhD dissertation, University of Alaska Fairbanks, May 2023), 253, <https://scholarworks.alaska.edu/>.

have already proved themselves to be both enthusiastic and capable. They have first-hand knowledge of the terrain and elements. They can shoot or move with astonishing speed in summer or winter. They are courageous, inherently disciplined, and loyal. . . . We can greatly add to the protection of our country without seriously depleting our military commitments elsewhere.”²⁵

Active-duty Soldiers arriving in Alaska from “outside” either on assignment or for training exercises, have steep learning curves to acclimate and gain skills critical to survival and tactical success in the Arctic. Who better than a cadre of Native Alaskans to provide lived-experience instruction to newly arrived troops? The 11th Division (Airborne) commander, MG Brian Eifler, US Army, recently made remarks to this effect,

NWTC [the Northern Warfare Training Center] is the Army’s premier cold weather school, and provides individual and small unit level, cold weather and mountain warfare training. While it is steeped in history and staffed with some of the best Soldier instructors in the nation, the division wants to incorporate Alaska Native SMEs into our cold weather courses to help refine our tactics, techniques and procedures. This will go a long way in deepening our understanding of the environment and improving our ability to withstand extreme cold and its effects across the warfighting functions.²⁶

A constructive and modern model for such a concept currently exists and could facilitate such an initiative—the Canadian Rangers. This military organization had a similar mission, structure, and heritage as the ATG and endured bureaucratic ups and downs over the decades. Today, the Canadian Rangers continue to provide an outstanding example of how local and Indigenous expertise in a paramilitary role affords Native populations the opportunity to serve while maintaining their traditional cultures and lifestyle, “successfully integrating national security and sovereignty agendas with community-based activities and local stewardship.”²⁷

Over time, the Canadian Rangers, too, have struggled with relevance in a nation whose citizens are rarely focused on purely Arctic concerns. As Rob Huebert states, “Canadians and Americans do not like to think about the North American Arctic in strategic terms. Canadians prefer to think of it in terms of their national psyche; of its stark beauty; of the experience of its northern indigenous peoples; and in terms of

²⁵ Blakeney, “The Security of Alaska and the Tundra Army.”

²⁶ Brian S. Eifler and Natlie M. Hardy, “Building Readiness Through Alaska Native Partnerships,” *Journal of Arctic and Climate Security Studies*, 1, no 1 (Summer 2023), 39–40, <https://tedstevensarcticcenter.org/>.

²⁷ P. Whitney Lackenbauer, *The Canadian Rangers: A Living History* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2013), 7.

both its economic potential and its environmental fragility. . . . But most of the time Canadians and Americans simply do not think about this region.”²⁸

As a result, the Canadian Rangers have also had to contend with massive funding cuts and periodic crises of identity and mission. Yet today they are the cornerstone of “two central elements of Canada’s Defense mission: surveillance and control of Canada’s territory, airspace, and maritime areas; and helping the Federal government achieve national goals . . . despite demographic changes over the previous half century, the Rangers remain the only military presence in some of the least populated parts of North America.”²⁹ Falling somewhere between the professional Soldiers of the AKARNG and the paramilitary volunteers of the ASDF, the Canadian Rangers model is a unique subset of the Canadian Reserve Forces and offers a reasonable, attainable, and cost effective opportunity for restoring the capabilities and capacities lost when the Eskimo Scout Battalions were disbanded.

Questions, then, arise as to whether federal or state governments have an appetite to undertake a similar Alaskan Rangers program, what level of support might be presumed by various villages and tribal and regional governments, and to what extent might Alaska Native Corporations invest in support of such a project. The possible secondary gains from such investments far exceed the military capacity increase and are limited only by the imagination. The ATG, after all, was largely a grassroots effort, if only with a small outside encouragement and leadership. Such an organization could breathe new life into defense-service opportunities in rural communities without being imposed from “the outside.”

In their military capacity, members of such an organization could serve as liaisons or ombudsmen to statewide military training exercises, provide a ready built, locally proposed leadership framework for a wide array of disaster responses, and serve as a continuous sovereign presence across thousands of miles of coast and wilderness. They could conceivably safeguard and maintain critical infrastructure, provide environmental data collection, facilitate search-and-rescue response, or teach and enhance Arctic-specific skills to any number of civilian or governmental agencies. Most importantly, they would begin to heal the fractured relationship between the military and many of our Alaska Native communities and serve as a bulwark against a generation of young people leaving the villages to seek opportunities elsewhere.

With each passing year, despite the heroic efforts of a few diehard believers trying to keep the links intact, and with rural recruiting efforts that seem to go in fits and

²⁸ Robert Huebert, “The Arctic and the Strategic Defence of North America: Resumption of the Long Polar Watch,” in *North American Strategic Defense in the 21st Century: Advanced Sciences and Technologies for Security Applications* (Calgary, AB: University of Calgary 2018), 174.

²⁹ Lackenbauer, *The Canadian Rangers*, 414.

starts, our military and Alaska Native communities grow further apart. Perhaps the real tragedy is that while the immediate challenges are replete with local nuance and are strategic in impact, the disconnect is highly reflective of a similar growing disconnect between the military and the rest of American society as well. This is not solely an Alaska problem. But in Alaska it is a problem for Alaskans to solve. Despite the high-profile ceremonies, conferences, and discussions between senior leaders of military and Native communities which are sure to continue and sure to generate amicable-yet-unremarkable headlines, there is no substitute for the multigenerational service that once was the pride of 111 small villages and hamlets across the Arctic, and that now remain only in the memories of elders who grow fewer with each passing day.³⁰

The founding characteristics of the ATG and Canadian Rangers are in urgent need in Alaska, particularly along the west and northern coastal regions where the ATG served most prominently. Highly localized units, decentralized leadership, informal, flexible, and self-sufficient in the extreme, the grassroots and internal creation of an organization with these characteristics is not only appropriate but also necessary given the US capability gaps in the Arctic at present. That such an organization could be based on a modern example of real success, embrace its legitimate heritage, and avoid the pitfalls that prevent the ARNG and ASDF from effectively recruiting and maintaining rural community members, and whose benefits could conceivably be indirectly monetized to the benefit of the Alaska Native Community they represent should appeal to many. That the same organization could present innovative solutions that augment current capabilities of the Alaska Organized Militia and active-duty defense partners without duplicating efforts, threatening legitimacy, or consuming scarce funding, should silence most opposition.

Alaska's defense problems can never be completely solved in Washington, DC, because few there have spent time here. And Alaskans have never cared much for the solutions of outsiders anyway. The objections that may be raised to the concerns and ideas voiced in this article are exactly the same as those raised by establishment officers and politicians generations ago when Major Marston pitched his idea to train and equip Alaska Natives in a legitimate defense role outside the National Guard. There are always those with objections about why a difficult undertaking should be avoided. There will be legal hurdles and funding challenges, questions of roles, responsibilities, and authorities. They are legitimate concerns, but they are also not unsolvable, nor should they distract or discourage us from addressing the problem. The fundamental issue at hand, what lacks most centrally in our Arctic defense strategy is the inclusion

³⁰ Ernest Gruening, "Introduction," in *Men of the Tundra*, Muktuk Marston (New York: October House Inc., 1969), 6.

of “the original, authentic Alaskans, who have lived here since pre-history, and have adapted themselves to climate, latitude, and environment.”³¹ Failing to meaningfully include them is to ignore our most precious advantage and disregards a proud history of service that many may desire to reclaim. They are still here; they never left. We have a duty to ask them with honor, as equal partners, and they may again answer as did their parents and grandparents before them. ❄️

Lt Col Jeff Hayes, US Army

Colonel Hayes is an 18-year Army officer and senior Army aviator rated in the OH-58D Kiowa Warrior and AH-64D Apache Longbow. He has multiple combat deployments to Afghanistan as a Scout/Light Attack Helicopter Pilot and has served three tours at Fort Wainwright, Alaska, in various capacities, including air cavalry troop commander, battalion operations officer, and battalion executive officer. His educational credentials include a BA in history from Norwich University and an MA in military operational art and science from the Air Command and Staff College. He is currently pursuing a graduate certificate in Arctic security through the University of Alaska Fairbanks where he is assigned as the professor of military science for Army ROTC.

Dr. John Pennington

Dr. Pennington is deputy director of the Center for Arctic Security & Resilience (CASR) at the University of Alaska Fairbanks and serves as Homeland Security & Emergency Management Advisor for the Iñupiat Community of the Arctic Slope (ICAS) in the development of the nation's first Arctic-based, Regional Tribal emergency management system. He is a former FEMA Region X Director and served for four elected terms in the Washington state House of Representatives, with three terms as Speaker Pro Tempore of the House. He holds a PhD in Indigenous Studies (Mellon Fellow) and is a certified emergency manager (CEM) from the International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM).

³¹ Gruening, “Introduction,” 2.

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