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The Airplane and the Imperial City: A Brief History of Seattle and American Empire

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Abstract

This essay explores airplane manufacturing in twentieth-century Seattle to trace the correspondence between major developmental moments in the city's history and broader transitional moments in American empire. In doing so, it argues that Seattle is best understood as an *imperial city* characterized by four ongoing features: extensive connections beyond the city's nominal borders; sustained alliance between private commercial interests and the state that made such connections possible; a built environment of technological infrastructure made to serve that alliance; and labor forces, segmented by race, subject to the evolving needs of empire.

Keywords

airplanes, military-industrial complex, Seattle, U.S. empire

On March 25, 1971, workers at the Boeing Company, the world's leading commercial airplane manufacturer, stood idle in the corporate giant's Seattle factory. The day before, after a protracted battle in the United States Congress, the federal government had canceled the Company's funding for the Super Sonic Transport (SST). A speculative project under development for nearly two decades, it had promised to produce the fastest commercial jet the world had ever seen. But now the only guarantees were pink slips for Boeing's SST team of some 6,000 workers, who would soon be joining Seattle's tens of thousands unemployed. Struggling to sell its brand new 747 jumbo jet in a turbulent global economy, Boeing had eliminated 60,000 jobs—60 percent of its Seattle workforce—in less than two years, spawning breadlines on the city's streets and capturing headlines around the world. To London's *Economist*, Seattle was the "City of Despair," and represented "the worst example of economic decline in any sector of America since the great depression 40 years ago."[1] By June 1971, close to 16 percent of all the city's workers were officially out of work. Among Seattle's Black residents, historically the last hired and first hired at Boeing, surveys put the number between 28 percent and 48 percent.[2] The SST cancelation, many feared, would be the final nail in the coffin of the city's economy.

As Boeing workers pondered their fate, a prerecorded message from U.S. President Richard Nixon echoed across the shopfloor. For Nixon, a strong SST supporter, Boeing's crisis was of

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global consequence. "Each time I fly in Air Force I – a Boeing plane – I am reminded of the role Boeing has played in making America the world's leader in commercial aviation," he consoled. "Throughout the world, the 707, the 727, the 737 and now the giant 747 have become symbols of America's leadership." Indeed, the Company had leveraged its government contracts producing bombers for the U.S. military during World War II and the Korean War to launch its commercial business and become one of the country's chief exporters. By 1960, its jets accounted for just under half of all global air traffic outside of noncommunist countries.[3]

Such dominance in air travel, coupled with military strength, had been key features of America's postwar power. But now, Nixon feared, American supremacy was in jeopardy. "The reason I fought so hard to keep the SST project alive," he explained to Boeing's latest layoffs, "was that I believe deeply that America must remain the vanguard of scientific and technological progress, the kind of progress your team represents, and to which you have been dedicated."[4] Disillusionment with military defense contractors, driven by the unpopularity of the Vietnam War, had doomed the SST in Congress. Increased international economic competition from Western Europe and Japan, moreover, had many wondering if America's days as a global power were numbered. The day of the SST vote in Congress, Nixon had fumed privately that the project's failure would doom America to the same declining fates of the French, British, and Spanish empires before it.[5]

These entwined urban and imperial crises of the early 1970s exemplified how, for better or for worse, in ascendancy or in decline, the airplane had bound Seattle's fortunes in the twentieth century to American empire.[6] While initially marginal to the city's economy, the airplane had found its place in coastal Seattle through the United States' growing imperial interests in the Pacific in the early decades of the century. The Boeing Company's subsequent growth in the 1930s provided the city's first genuine industrial base and made the airplane its major industrial product. While expanding Seattle into a modern metropolis with a new political economy dependent on U.S. global dominance, it also intensified racial segregation in the city's housing and labor markets. As U.S. dominance grew dramatically during World War II and the Cold War, airplane manufacturing reconfigured the remote city into a central site of American power and global capitalism. This reconfiguration, though definitive, remained ongoing and contingent, a fact revealed by Boeing's troubles in the 1970s, which sparked a short but significant battle over the role of the airplane and global connection in the city's future.

Present methods of understanding urban growth and global connection in the United States cannot make full sense of Seattle's relationship to empire. Though a robust literature exists connecting urban history and the colonial empires of Europe, a comparable body of work on American cities has been late in developing.[7] For decades, the phrase "urban imperialism" in U.S. urban historiography referred to the ambitions of local city boosters and their siphoning of wealth from cities' rural hinterlands, particularly in the nineteenth-century American West. Cities within the United States were viewed as individual empires in their own right, either because city builders imagined their own city as a successor to Rome, or because they emerged as capitalist centers through which natural resources were channeled to other parts of the country.[8] The role of global power in American cities, however, has remained overlooked.

Histories of American urban growth in the twentieth century, meanwhile, have typically focused on the sprawling metropolitan corridors of the "Sunbelt," the American South and Southwest. These were cities created in large part by federal government investment whose local conservative political cultures gave rise to the national Republican Party.[9] Despite Seattle's shared origins in government spending, its historically liberal politics and rainy Pacific Northwest climate have made it an awkward fit for the Sunbelt. A group of economists, studying the connection between urban development and military spending, once proposed a Seattle-inclusive "Gunbelt" instead.[10] The term still does not communicate, however, the various forms of global connections that the commercial success of Boeing illustrates. These include transnational

migration, global trends in urban planning, and technological and communications linkages between cities whose outsized political economic imprints supposedly supersede the scale of the nation-state.[11] Yet, again, recent work by urban historians and sociologists on these "global cities" does not quite capture Seattle's trajectory. Such work falls short to the extent that it fails to account for the origins of global connection in relationships of power typically intertwined with or emerging from the nation-state itself.[12]

The multidimensional relationship between urban development and American power in the world, illustrated by the history of U.S. airplane manufacturing, requires understanding Seattle as an *imperial* city. Imperial, as defined by historian Paul Kramer, refers to "a dimension of power in which asymmetries in the scale of political action, regimes of spatial ordering, and modes of exceptionalizing difference enable and produce relations of hierarchy, discipline, dispossession, extraction, and exploitation" across long-distance geographies.[13] At each turn in its historical relationship with the airplane, Seattle has exhibited four ongoing features of an American imperial city: extensive connections beyond the city's nominal borders; ongoing alliance between private commercial interests and the state that make such connections possible; a built environment of technological infrastructure made to serve that alliance; and labor forces, segmented by race, subject to the evolving needs of empire. Reexamining Seattle's urban history from the perspective of the airplane supports a shift in focus from the parochial "urban imperialism" or the stateless "global city" to the global imperial city; from individual cities siphoning wealth from specific, limited hinterlands, or effecting transnational linkages, to cities operative within much wider fields of power shaped by colonialism, capitalism, and the state, and structured by race, class, and gender.

Pacific War Machine: Rise of an Airplane Metropolis

The airplane arrived in Seattle, where the marks of an imperial city were already established features. It would push the territorial reach, overlap of military power and commercial interests, technological infrastructure, and racial segregation that characterized the city's development to new heights. The remote city was incorporated in 1851 as a settler colony of the expanding United States. Originally accessible primarily by water, the first ground route into the area, Military Road, was completed by order of the Washington Territorial Legislature in 1864 to shuttle militia into Seattle in the event of hostilities with Native peoples. The road ultimately facilitated further white settlement as the city's economy grew. Development was driven by the shipment of Pacific Northwest timber and coal through Seattle's deep-water harbor on the Puget Sound. It accelerated with the arrival of railroads in the 1880s and was consolidated by a scramble for city real estate, which was pitched to prospective buyers with an appeal to empires of yore. Early boosters, for instance, likened the steep topography of early Seattle to the seven hills of imperial Rome.[14] Despite Native peoples' key role as laborers in the settlement's earliest industries, particularly the local Duwamish whose chief Sealth inspired the city's name, they were ultimately banned by ordinance from within the settlement's limits.[15]

Contrary to the "urban imperialism" school of urban American West historiography, Seattle's early growth was not all real estate holdings and regional hinterlands. As the city developed, it was increasingly bound by trade and labor flows to a broader field of global power, the colonial construction of the "Pacific," which had been ongoing since the spread of capitalism out of Europe and around the world in the sixteenth century.[16] Here, military power, commercial interests, technological development, and racial divisions of labor took on global dimensions, connecting Seattle to Asian nations five thousand miles away across the Pacific Ocean on vastly uneven terms.[17] Chinese workers, recruited in the 1870s to build the local railroad tracks and to labor on the farms of Seattle's hinterlands, were expelled from the city thereafter by racist white mob violence and exclusionary immigration policies. Those same policies later targeted

successive waves of Japanese and Filipino migrants.[18] The United States colonial acquisition of the Philippine archipelago following the Spanish-American War of 1898 heightened Seattle's position as a center of global power, both as a major port and as a military base.[19] The 1909 Alaska–Yukon–Pacific (AYP) Exposition, which lionized the emergent U.S. empire, also celebrated its host city, Seattle, as a "gateway to the Orient."[20] Port of Seattle Commissioner cum historian George Cotterill celebrated this imperial orientation in his 1928 chronicle of Puget Sound, *The Climax of a World Quest*, which cast the Pacific Northwest as the titular terminus of the civilizing "westward course of empire."[21]

Government investment in aviation and Seattle increased alongside the global ambitions of the U.S. empire. In 1924, in a show of its growing power, the U.S. military organized the first flight around the world. The endeavor echoed similar imperial displays of strength organized by Teddy Roosevelt in the wake of the U.S. seizure of the Philippines, and the logistics of the flight both relied upon and strengthened the country's naval supremacy. The aeronautical expedition's four planes began their journey to fifty-two stops around the globe from the Sand Point Naval Air Base in Seattle. Each plane bore the name of a major American city: the *Chicago*, the *Boston*, the *New Orleans*, and, significantly, the *Seattle*. The planes were built by California's Donald Douglas, not Boeing, and the *Seattle*, which crashed in the Alaskan wilderness after two weeks, was the only plane that did not complete the journey.[22] Neither fact, however, diminished the city's growing profile within both American aviation and empire. Though the smallest and youngest city represented among the four metropolitan eponyms, Seattle's geographic importance to the extension of U.S. power in the Pacific and in the world made it the equal of the other three more established regional capitals.

Boeing's beginnings in Seattle reflected this orientation toward the Pacific, in which military and commercial power remained intertwined. William Boeing, the American-born scion of a wealthy Austrian-German family, Yale-educated engineer, and a Pacific Northwest timber baron, first invested in the construction of wooden seaplanes after witnessing an airplane demonstration at the AYP exposition in 1909 and becoming smitten with aviation. By 1916, he had incorporated an airplane company, the Pacific Aero Products Company, the name a nod to the oceanic reaches he aimed to bridge. But the business, which Boeing renamed after himself the following year, remained short on capital. For that, he turned to the U.S. government. Amid global fears bred by World War I, Boeing and fellow aviation enthusiasts organized the bombarding of downtown Seattle with an airdrop of pamphlets that argued the nation's security depended on building more airplanes. In spring of 1917, Boeing traveled to Washington, D.C., to make the same argument directly to the government. He secured key contracts from the U.S. Navy, but with the war's end in November 1918, the company's finances quickly became touch and go.[23] Boeing persisted in seeking government business, however, and eventually, by 1928 renewed army contracts had established the firm as one of the United States' largest airplane manufacturers and Seattle's largest manufacturer overall.[24]

As a conflict with the imperial rival of Japan, World War II was the ultimate test of U.S. designs on the Pacific. The airplane's ability to project power over long oceanic distances proved crucial to that effort. Government support for plane manufacturing—and Boeing in particular—exploded as a result, fundamentally transforming Seattle as an urban center. Federal money poured into all Pacific states during the war, and no urban economy received more than Seattle. The value of the city's military contracts in manufacturing was five times greater than the national average, while the overall contracts were twice that of Los Angeles and four times that of San Francisco. The Boeing Company singlehandedly accounted for that difference. Of the $1.5 billion in contracts received by Seattle, two-thirds were for airplanes. Rush orders for B-17 bombers and the larger B-29 drove a sharp increase in Boeing's total Seattle workforce from 4,000 in 1939 to nearly 50,000 in 1944, accounting for roughly 56 percent of the city's manufacturing growth over the same period.[25] The Company's output was staggering, as was the violence and destruction it made

possible. Over the course of the war, 7,000 B-17s were built in Seattle, responsible for 46 percent of all bomb tonnage dropped in Europe. 1,119 B-29s, developed later in the war, came off Seattle area assembly lines. Combined with B-29s assembled in Wichita, Kansas, the planes delivered 96 percent of all bomb tonnage dropped on Japan, including the nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.[26]

The new infrastructure and vast amounts of labor power demanded by industrial airplane production transformed Seattle into a bona fide metropolis, establishing developmental trends that would persist for decades: suburban sprawl, accelerated population growth, and racially segmented work forces. War had been an engine of urbanization in Seattle before, but this time it was on a scale far beyond the construction of Military Road or its role as a supply hub for the occupation of the Philippines. During World War II, the Boeing Company's production site expanded dramatically in the Duwamish River Valley, just below Military Road, into one of the largest industrial facilities ever built under one roof. By 1942, the Valley could no longer contain Boeing, and the Company established a second production facility for the B-29 eight miles away in the suburban town of Renton.[27]

Along with its geography, the war transformed Seattle's population. Having plateaued during the depression years of the 1930s, it increased by 27 percent during the 1940s as migrants flooded the city seeking wartime jobs, sparking a pitched housing crisis.[28] Meanwhile, the city's racial demographics changed dramatically as its labor market was restructured according to imperial priority.[29] Before the war, Japanese residents had represented Seattle's largest non-white group at nearly 10,000, and their presence was often cited by white city boosters as evidence of the city's cosmopolitan potential as an international hub of trade. Identified racially with the imperial rival of Japan by the U.S. government, however, they were subject to incarceration during the war. Only 4,500 would return.[30] Wartime labor needs opened circumscribed opportunities in Seattle for Black migrants, mainly from the U.S. South, who took the place of Japanese Americans as the city's largest non-white group. A shared dedication to racial exclusion, often couched in the language of anti-communism, by Boeing and its principal union, the International Association of Machinists District 751, confined most Black workers to unskilled or semi-skilled professions, particularly within the shipbuilding industry. Black employment at Boeing peaked at 1,600 during the war but would plummet dramatically at the war's end, establishing a racially segregated labor market that would shape how the growing economic returns of American expansion would be distributed.[31]

Empire of Tomorrow: Seattle at Mid-Century

Seattle emerged from World War II with an industrial base, a new metropolitan geography, an expanding population, and a thoroughly new political economy. A broad coalition of private and public forces, including organized labor, business, and politicians both local and federal, now equated the city's well-being with the fortunes of Boeing and government military spending. Meanwhile, as Boeing leveraged its military business to dominate the world's commercial jet markets, it increasingly dominated Seattle's economy, patterning its urban growth, racial composition, and political culture.

In the wake of Japan's official surrender in September 1945, the U.S. Army canceled orders for B-29 bombers. The city's new coalition, which included unions, municipal officials, and the Chamber of Commerce, responded with an organized outcry: mass demonstrations in the city's downtown and concerted public appeals to the federal government. While it failed to reinstate the B-29 orders and did little to stem the anticipated downturns of peacetime, the coalition had staying power. It stirred again when military buildup recommenced with the onset of the Cold War, forcing Air Force officials to walk back public statements that Seattle's coastal airplane production facilities were too geographically vulnerable to air attack. At the center of this close ongoing

relationship with the federal government were Washington State's Senators Warren Magnuson and Henry Jackson, New Deal Democrats whose political careers owed much to their backing by organized labor. Long tenured in Congress, both played large roles in the postwar battles to retain bomber contracts. Jackson, in particular, was known for his hawkish views on national security and heavy advocacy of military spending, which later earned him the epithet of the "senator from Boeing."[32] Their national profiles would only grow as the century wore on. Seattle grew along with them.

The mutually supportive interchanges between military and civil aviation, backed by the U.S. federal government, continued to define Boeing's success in the postwar years. When the United States entered the Korean War in 1950 with a federal military budget three times its previous size, Boeing and Seattle benefited again, with the company adding missile systems and tankers to its military portfolio.[33] Most significantly, the bevy of U.S. defense dollars allowed Boeing to take new risks in the development of commercial jet planes. Building on the research and design knowledge gained through previous work on its jet bombers, Boeing invested over a quarter of its net worth into the development of the 707, the fastest commercial airplane to date. Rolling off the company's Renton assembly line in 1954, the 707 quickly emerged as the single most popular aircraft in the world.

While the company's boosters were quick to credit American ingenuity for the plane's great success, it was truly made possible by aviation's central role in the global economic dominance enjoyed by the United States following World War II. The war had generated vast global air routes, tied together by American military bases, which the United States was poised to exploit after the war due to its huge manufacturing base, untouched by the destruction that had wrecked the world's other major economies. Aviation enabled a new form of empire for the United States, one less dependent on the formal incorporation of territory and organized through the disbursal of air bases around the globe from which its power could be projected. It also allowed its citizens to travel the globe, enlisting civilians as ambassadors of a new U.S.-led world order. For developing countries with aspirations to join this world order, air travel was essential, an airline as important to national sovereignty as an army or a flag. And U.S. airplane manufacturers like Boeing stood by, ready to sell (national security trepidations about selling to communist nations notwithstanding).[34]

Before the close of the 1950s, Boeing's jets made up over half of air traffic in the United States, and just under half of all the world's air traffic outside of communist nations.[35] And the company was not done growing; or at least its chief executives didn't think so. In 1965, betting on the large magnitude growth of aviation, the company co-financed with the airliner Pan Am construction of the largest and most expensive commercial airplane yet, the 747 jumbo jet. The 735,000-pound, 250-foot-long behemoth was two and a half times larger than the 707 and would smash records with a passenger capacity of over 350 people. The project was so large, in fact, that it had potential consequences for the national economy. Boeing's William Allen and Pan Am's Juan Trippe cleared the venture with U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson, offering their personal assurances that the airplane would neither interfere with the war in Vietnam nor contribute to inflation.[36] Around the same time, the U.S. government decided to join the international technological race for supersonic travel against the British/French Concord and the Soviet Union's TU-144. Committed to keeping up with the upward trajectory of the postwar Jet Age, Boeing secured in 1966 a federal contract to develop the fast SST alongside the 747.[37]

The horizons of Seattle's growth seemed endless, too. As Boeing's global business grew, so did its already outsized imprint on Seattle. The successful launch of the company's 727 jetliner in 1960 drove the number of its Seattle area employees to over 100,000 by mid-decade, twice what Boeing's payroll had been at its peak during World War II.[38] The 747 venture further ballooned Boeing's payrolls and drove yet another Seattle population boom. By the end of the 1960s, the metropolitan area had increased by 421,000 people, with almost 60 percent of

those—259,000—coming between 1965 and 1970, when Boeing had added over 50,000 new jobs.[39] When Boeing's Seattle area employment peaked in 1967 at 148,000, nearly one in five workers in any sector of the Seattle economy worked for the Boeing Company.[40]

Boeing's rise contributed to Seattle's growing global profile and reinforced the city's historical role as a vector of American empire across the Pacific. Seattle debuted its new global identity by hosting the 1962 "Century 21" World's Fair. The six-month-long fair, a paean to the prospects of peace and prosperity under American capitalist auspices funded largely by the federal government, drew nearly ten million visitors to its exhibits lionizing American science and technology. One of its attractions became Seattle's most recognizable architectural landmark, the Space Needle. While Eastern bloc countries and the Soviet Union were invited to participate, federal legislation had stated "no Communist de facto government holding any people of the Pacific Rim in subjugation"—meaning the Asian nations of North Korea, North Vietnam, and the People's Republic of China—were allowed.[41] The exemptions, which alluded to the U.S. intervention in Korea and the growing military interest in Vietnam, belied the veneer of global peace otherwise proffered by the World's Fair, and suggested military applications were not far behind the civil science marvels on display.

Planning for the exposition had begun, ironically, as a mid-1950s campaign by Seattle downtown businessmen and property owners concerned over Boeing's growing dominance of the city and the attendant trends of suburbanization. Imagining the event as an updated rendition of the 1909 AYP Exposition, they entertained possible themes like a "Festival of the West." But the Soviet launch of the Sputnik satellite in 1957, inaugurating the Cold War space race, led federal politicians to radically reimagine the fair. Washington State's Senator Warren Magnuson secured $10 million from the federal government for an exhibit on science, bringing the business of Boeing back front and center.

Downtown businesses had nevertheless been right: Boeing's expanding imprint had indeed hastened the process of suburbanization immensely. During the 1960s, the company opened facilities in the small town of Auburn, located south of Seattle in the Green River Valley, contributing to a steep decline in area farming. Moreover, it chose the mill town of Everett, twenty miles north of Seattle, for its gargantuan new 747 facility, which required the single largest building ever constructed by volume.[42] Boeing employees followed this dispersed development, tending to cluster near the company's facilities. Even prior to the 747 expansion, over half of Boeing employees were already living outside Seattle city limits, and employees were expected to be available to work at any one of the Boeing plants from Auburn to Everett, a span of 56 miles.[43] Thus, while people were moving to the metropolitan region in large numbers over the course of the 1960s, the city of Seattle proper saw a decline in its population, falling from 557,087 in 1960 to 530,881 ten years later—a dramatic decline considering the region's overall net gain of 421,000 over the same period.[44]

As before, the benefits of the Boeing Company's growth were distributed unevenly along the lines of race and gender, continuing to shape Seattle's labor relations and political culture. The company's hiring practices, which had excluded Black workers during World War II and thereafter privileged white males typically recruited from outside the Pacific Northwest, made Seattle one of the whitest metropolitan areas in the United States throughout the twentieth century. In 1970, whites represented an overwhelming 87 percent of the city's population. Seattle's suburbs, where Boeing's growth was most concentrated, were even more racially homogenous. Renton, for instance, was over 90 percent white.[45] Though Black employment did double at Boeing during the boom years, peaking at 5,369 in 1967 (3.6 percent of the total workforce), the benefits did not extend to Seattle's Black community, which at the time still had an unemployment rate of 10 percent—three times the size of the city's overall.[46] To dispel class conflict and stabilize relationships with its employees, Boeing's official corporate culture promoted the company as one big "family," whose ideal worker was white, male, and heterosexual—the breadwinning, self-reliant

head of a nuclear household.[47] Unions at the company, which represented both production-line blue-collar workers and educated engineers, shared this ideology. They envisioned their members as self-made middle-class individuals and productive members of a nation of free consumers, rather than a collective working-class subject to employer prerogative.[48] This culture redounded to mid-century Seattle's reputation more broadly. *LIFE* magazine articles and academic political science studies alike heralded the city as a staid, middle-class mecca bereft of class conflict or racial strife, disregarding the exclusion and global violence on which the city's economy was predicated.[49]

Embattled Empire: Seattle and Global Turbulence in the 1970s

Aviation seemed to make the sky the proverbial limit for Seattle. Until, seemingly overnight, the city devolved from a shining beacon of the Jet Age into a worldwide symbol of American decline. As the American empire faced new challenges in circumscribed defense budgets and international competition, Seattle's economy, built by Boeing, was nearly destroyed by it. In time, Seattle's urban infrastructure, made possible by the airplane, would provide a basis for the renewal of U.S. power in the world. In the early 1970s, however, none of that was foreseeable, or inevitable.

Beginning in 1969, Boeing gutted 60,000 jobs, driving the city's jobless rate to the highest in the United States by 1971. Enrollments for government relief skyrocketed, rates of foreclosure led the nation, and even long bread lines formed at emergency food banks. A Congressional report highlighting affluent engineers now struggling to feed their families christened Seattle "the food stamp capital" of the United States.[50] The impact of the crisis was disproportionately felt in the city's marginalized communities, however, where joblessness was exacerbated by decades of structural racism. Black employees of the Boeing Company, for example, fell from a peak of 5,369 in 1967 (3.65 percent of the corporation's overall Seattle workforce) to 1,533 by 1970 (1.4 percent of the workforce), a drop of over 70 percent. Meanwhile, laid-off Boeing employees with "higher skills" scooped up entry-level jobs upon which Black workers normally depended for employment.[51]

Boeing was mostly to blame for its predicament. The immediate cause of the crisis was the reckless business thinking behind the 747, which had been rubber-stamped by the company's board without an extensive evaluation of the risks involved. The rush to complete the plane, a race in part against Boeing's own SST, led to production errors, design delays, and an overall overextension of the company. Worse, in putting all its chips on the megaproject, Boeing had made a critical blunder in assuming passenger traffic would continue to increase at the rates it had since the dawn of commercial jet travel. Instead, the well of passengers that the industry had added from declines in boat and railroad transportation dried up, and with them, the anticipated orders for the new 747 from airliners. In one dismal stretch, Boeing failed to receive a single order from a U.S. airliner for seventeen months.[52]

Beyond the business errors of the 747, the sudden global turbulence of the early 1970s was a key factor in Boeing's sudden flirtation with bankruptcy. As Richard Nixon's concerns over the SST illustrated, for U.S. policymakers, events at the end of the 1960s spelled new threats to American global power. Western Europe and Japan's dramatic postwar recoveries, engineered under the auspices of U.S. supremacy, were generating new international pressures through economic competition, and for the first time since 1893, the United States was exhibiting a trade deficit.[53] High-interest rates, favored by the Nixon administration to cool inflation, were preventing airliners from borrowing money to buy Boeing's airplanes.[54] Meanwhile, military business, the traditional safety net for Boeing in times of lean commercial sales, was dampened by the growing movement against the Vietnam War.

In this atmosphere, the association of the SST with a large military contractor like Boeing became its greatest political liability as it came up for renewal before Congress. Through most of the 1960s, the program had depended on a solid congressional coalition led by Henry Jackson and Warren Magnuson. It also received strong support from President Richard Nixon, who saw the SST as instrumental to maintaining American supremacy in commercial aviation and a military edge over the Soviet Union. Despite Nixon's backing, Jackson and Magnuson parliamentary maneuvering, and a sustained lobbying campaign by organized labor, the SST fell to Congressional cuts in March 1971. Its fate had been successfully recast by its opponents into a national referendum on technological hubris, noise and air pollution, and the wastefulness and harm of the U.S. government.[55]

Many saw the 1971 congressional decision as the end of the Jet Age. Seattle's Black Nationalist newspaper *The Afro-American Journal* proclaimed "White Seattle is Doomed" next to a cartoon showing a boarded-up burning cave with a nuclear family of pig-faced people representing white Seattle huddled in the corner, tears streaming down their faces. The Boeing bust, it noted, made little difference for the city's Black residents, given the racist police violence and discrimination that had characterized the preceding boom.[56] Less strident, but no less convinced that Boeing had run its course, were rising sectors of the city's business and political elite. The late 1960s had seen a changing of the guard in Seattle municipal politics. Long-tenured members of the city council, backed for decades by downtown business owners, were replaced by younger, aspiring professionals—attorneys, architects, academics, urban planners, and consultants. Though their milieu owed a great deal to the culture of highbrow consumption bred in Seattle by generations of well-educated and well-paid Boeing engineers, these rising technocrats were unbeholden to the Boeing Company itself. Their sympathies against the Vietnam War gave them, in fact, an aversion to anything military-related.[57] Furthermore, though many bemoaned the widespread indirect influence of the company in the political life of the city, Boeing had never directly invested in city politics. Like most large firms in urban areas, its enormous economic influence allowed it to remain aloof from formal political participation.[58] As a result, the new generation could safely propose a Boeing-less future without evoking backlash. For instance, Seattle Mayor Wes Uhlman, a figurehead of the movement elected in 1968, called for "a new stable economic base to replace the cornucopia of aerospace manufacturing" in a speech to the local business community.[59]

Boeing struggled, but Seattle's global connections remained. In place of airplane manufacturing and big government contracts to industrial giants, Mayor Uhlman and other elites advanced a postindustrial agenda of urban economic development. Public-private partnerships between municipal government and business owners were encouraged to prioritize the growth of skilled professional services and smaller businesses over industrial concerns like aerospace manufacturing.[60] Like so many Seattle boosters had before, this economic development coalition saw the city's future in the Pacific. International trade, which primarily generated service jobs in fields such as banking, logistics management, and real estate, was the favored strategy of post industrialism's supporters. They saw the opportunity in the fast-growing economies of Japan and other Asian nations that were otherwise challenging American supremacy.[61] Building airplanes may have been off the agenda for postindustrial economic development, but flying on them became an increasing part of doing business, with international trade junkets becoming a regular activity for Mayor Uhlman and others.[62] Many saw a bellwether of the future when, in 1970, the struggling Boeing Company unloaded the riverfront site of its original Plant I to create a new terminal for the ever-expanding Port of Seattle.[63]

Visions of a Seattle without airplanes proved vastly premature, however, as did hopes that the city's economy could be severed from government dependence. Indeed, federal spending returned with a vengeance as Senators Warren Magnuson and Henry Jackson found other ways to stimulate their home state's economy besides the SST. From 1970 to 1972, the exact years of Boeing's

crisis, federal outlays to Washington State ballooned from $3.4 billion to over $5 billion, with the state's share of federal spending per capita over forty percent higher than the national average. Washington State's rank among all states in Defense Department spending improved from eighteenth place to twelfth, NASA spending from twenty-sixth to nineteenth, and Interior Department spending from sixth to second.[64]

Magnuson and Jackson also found a political ally in Richard Nixon, who shared their belief in the strategic importance of the Boeing Company to American economic and technological supremacy. Government relief to Democrat-leaning Seattle had been a political non-starter for the Republican Nixon administration, sparking some high-profile battles in the press over unemployment compensation and food aid. Maintaining a globally dominant American aerospace industry, on the other hand, was crucial to Nixon's foreign policy agenda, which, in the face of defeats to direct defense spending, increasingly relied on government-brokered deals in arms and technology.[65] The administration therefore came to Boeing's aid, ensuring the company was awarded several new military and space contracts among the diminished number available, such as the Pentagon's Airborne Warning and Control System. It also lent Boeing a crucial hand in the international arena through a renewed aircraft export marketing campaign by the federal Export-Import Bank. Most consequentially, the federal government lifted long-standing Cold War restrictions on commercial jet sales to China, allowing Boeing to sell jets to the communist nation in 1972.[66]

The technological infrastructure of the Jet Age turned out to be Seattle's ultimate saving grace, transforming it into a small, but significant "global city." Both the city's service economy and Boeing would catch flight on the second wind of American hegemony that emerged following the 1970s. In the formulation of historian Charles Maier, the American "Empire of Production" had become an "Empire of Consumption." The strength of U.S. manufacturing had diminished in the face of global outsourcing and technological competition. However, the country's economic dominance increasingly relied on its ability to serve as the world's foremost market and financial center and to maintain the research, design, and service infrastructure that made global enterprise possible.[67] This shift in economic focus was reflected in employment patterns. Between 1974 and 1986, employment growth in the Pacific Northwest mirrored national trends, yet the composition of that growth was exceptional. Over 91 percent of the region's employment gains were attributable to the service sector, with the lion's share centered on the Seattle metropolitan area.[68] Boeing ultimately benefited from these trends by providing a product, the airplane, which was central to that globalizing economy. International business, in fact, was at the center of the company's recovery, with Boeing posting $5.5 billion in foreign sales between 1970 and 1976 (at the cost, a scandal would later reveal, of at least $70 million in improper payoffs to foreign agents).[69] As Boeing slowly got back off the ground, the Seattle economy followed, posting a gain of 24,000 jobs between 1972 and 1973, of which three-quarters owed to aerospace.[70]

Seattle area's economy became more mixed in the late twentieth century as its global services grew, and it became headquarters to software firms like Microsoft and online retailer Amazon. Still, patterns of employment insecurity and racial segregation established after World War II remained central features of the city. Seattle's job market continued to advantage white migrants from outside the area. Educated young white professionals increasingly flocked to the city, spelling gentrification and displacement for the city's long-standing Black community.[71] Boeing's outsized imprint on the area economy, moreover, persistently heightened the area's susceptibility to national recessions from boom-and-bust cycles, subjecting all but its most senior employees to regular periods of sustained unemployment. The region's jobless rate thus remained well above the national average into the 1980s, though local politicians and businesses stopped calling for action, particularly as the city's white-collar industries continued to grow.[72]

The reconfiguration of America's role in global capitalism at the turn and beginning of the twenty-first century demanded new efforts at profit-seeking by corporate giants like Boeing. The

Company accordingly pursued the merger with fellow aerospace giant McDonnell Douglas in 1997, the ongoing outsourcing of its supply chain, and increased efforts to escape organized labor—including the movement of its corporate headquarters to Chicago in 2001 and the opening of a new, non-union factory in South Carolina in 2011. Such developments led to intensified battles with the Company's unions, as its workforce bristled at new, more hostile methods of management and the continued use of layoffs to balance the Company's books.[73] Despite these trends, Boeing remained Washington State's largest private employer until the pandemic year of 2020, when the Company reduced its regional workforce by 18 percent, nearly 13,000 people. Afterward, the growing workforce of global retail giant Amazon usurped Boeing's claim to the title for the first time in three-quarters of a century. Now, many fewer Boeing workers call Seattle home today, as the influx of tech workers has driven up the cost of living, particularly for housing.[74]

Conclusion: An Equivocal Symbol of Empire

Each major developmental moment in Seattle's history corresponded with the strength and reach of American empire. The backwater lumber mill town grew quickly into a city as American interests broadened into the wider field of the Pacific, increasing the importance of Seattle's deep-water harbor. The airplane, partially born of that economy of wood and water, ensured that Seattle's connections to the world would no longer rely on the blessings and curses of physical geography. The U.S. governments' massive federal investment in airplane manufacturing, critical to its military victory in World War II and the maintenance of its global dominance afterward, further provided Seattle with a mass industrial base and a worldwide market. Industry and commerce-enabled Seattle to become a modern metropolis. Finally, by the late twentieth century, the city recast its frontier reputation as an outpost of settler colonialism into the Jet Age purveyor of science and technology and headquarters of global trade and retail. These investments, wrought with racial exclusion and based in the organized violence of U.S. foreign policy, also exposed Seattle to the global turbulence that ensued whenever the violent and exclusionary terms of the American empire were challenged.

Arguably, all American cities, to an extent, share this imperial history, both in their settler colonial origins and their subsequent economic developments within the global economy. If Seattle is unexceptional as an imperial city, the outsized role of the airplane in its development nonetheless puts these imperial qualities into bold relief. Urban history in the United States, in this perspective, reaches beyond discrete municipal boundaries toward global processes of power organized through multiple vectors. Seattle's global urban history thus reveals the compounding territorial legacies of past U.S. colonial ventures, from the conquest of the North American continent into the Pacific. It traces the complex interplay between the military state and the nominally private corporate sector, between the manufacturing of demand and the political and economic biases of technological development. Finally, it casts new light and the segmentation of labor markets through differentiations based on race.

The next chapter in the history of Seattle and the airplane remains to be seen. As of this writing, a curious symbol of the Jet Age, past and present, is under construction in downtown Seattle. The hulk of a decommissioned 747 jumbo jet, which ceased production at Boeing in 2022, will feature as a prominent architectural component strung between two condominium towers. The development adds to the countless high-end residential complexes built in the past decade for the city's massive influx of high technology workers, the latest migratory wave of professional service employees that began three-quarters of a century ago with Boeing's skilled engineers. Speaking to local news, the developer explained the jet's inclusion in the design as an emblem of Seattle's technological heritage. "What symbol celebrates innovation better than the Boeing 747? There isn't one."[75] The plane's responsibility for the greatest urban crisis in the city's history,

fifty years in the past, seems forgotten. Nevertheless, its greater entanglements with the global violence and exclusions of empire, and its reproduction of those exclusions within the Seattle economy, cast a shade of ambivalence over that celebration. What will the plane represent in another fifty years, especially as the contribution of jet travel to global climate change falls under greater scrutiny?[76] What of Boeing's most recent business crises, such as the frequent production problems caused by its newly outstretched global supply chains, or the safety issues of its 737 MAX caused by ill-considered cost-cutting?[77] Whatever the future of the airplane is, its place within the history of Seattle as an imperial city and of the American empire more broadly must be reckoned with.

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