

I Think I See Russia ... No, Wait ...

By STEVE LOPEZ
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NOME, Alaska -- Yes, Nome. Why not?

I wanted to see the real Alaska, and I was told that would require me to get beyond Anchorage, which is sometimes derided as Los Anchorage because of its enormous population (280,000) and sprawling suburbs.

Nome is way, way, way out west on the Bering Sea, reachable only by plane, boat or dog sled. And as vice presidential candidate and Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin said, in trying to put voters at ease about her foreign affairs credentials, you can see Russia from this part of the state.

So I landed on this edge-of-nowhere burg (pop. 3,600, give or take a few Eskimos) and headed into town expecting to find lots of Palin supporters and perhaps even a few potential foreign policy advisers in the event of a John McCain-Sarah Palin administration.

It turns out lots of people here have seen Russia, but none of them felt qualified to be vice president or take on a Cabinet position. I borrowed some binoculars and got excited when I zoomed in on a large land mass just to the west. "That's not Russia," said Norbert Thomas, an Inupiat Eskimo who

was carving a piece of driftwood near the beach on a balmy and sunny, 50-degree day. "It's Sledge Island."

I tried to talk politics, but Thomas said he wasn't interested. Besides, he said, "If I don't carve, I don't eat."

My first big surprise came when I dropped by the Nome Nugget, which calls itself Alaska's oldest newspaper.

"Rural Alaska is mostly Democratic," said editor and publisher Nancy McGuire.

I wondered, then, how Palin's approval ratings as governor were as high as 80 percent. That's an easy one, McGuire said. The state population is concentrated in and around Anchorage and Wasilla, where she's the hometown girl.

"Shows what they know," said McGuire, a sassy old salt whose shack of an office sits on Front Street, a saloon-studded strip that was teeming with gold-rush prospectors 100 years ago.

Sure, McGuire said, on a crystal-clear day from the nearby village

of Wales or from one of the islands, you can see Big Diomed Island in Russia or maybe even the distant cloud cover on the Russian mainland. But it's not like you can smell the Smirnoff or wave to Vladimir Putin.

When McGuire told me that she once flew near Big Diomed for a college class and that her plane was chased away by a Russian MIG, I suggested she might be in line to become secretary of State. "I'll go for president," she said, noting that she has more Russia experience than Palin. "I've seen it closer."

To be honest, I hadn't expected to find a member of the liberal media elite in the town that serves as terminus for the Iditarod mush trail. McGuire's views are not local gospel, though.

Mary Knodel, who runs the Arctic Trading Post, is a Palin fan, and not just because she's selling the hot biography, "Sarah: How a Hockey Mom Turned Alaska's Political Establishment Upside Down."

"She's a breath of fresh air," said Knodel, calling Palin unafraid to stand up to Big Oil or Alaska's GOP establishment.

And don't worry about foreign affairs, Knodel said.

"If McCain dropped dead tomorrow," she said, Palin would have well-informed advisers, and she'd be able to make "common sense" decisions.

Former Nome Mayor Leo

Rasmussen said Palin's selection was news to cheer, in part because it promotes the great state of Alaska.

But if McCain keels over, is she prepared to lead after just two years in charge of a state with roughly one-third the population of Los Angeles' San Fernando Valley?

"Who is prepared to lead this country?" Rasmussen asked, suggesting that the story of Palin's sudden rise from small-town obscurity was practically Lincolnesque.

OK, so I might not have agreed with everyone I met, but I kind of liked this town, whose motto is, "There's no place like Nome." It's a funky, independent-minded burg where it's not uncommon to find people stumbling out of saloons mid-day or talking politics over coffee.

I met lots of no-nonsense people -- some of whom still fish, hunt and work the mines. And most of them, whether they support Palin or not, would have preferred that Palin just be herself, rather than make the silly suggestion that she has foreign affairs insights based on geography, or "command experience" simply because her office oversees the state's National Guard.

At Milano's Pizzeria & Sushi, run by Koreans, a table of four was joking about Tina Fey's portrayal of Palin on "Saturday Night Live."

"And Tina Fey said, 'I can see Russia from my house,'" one woman giggled.

Lew Tobin can't see Russia from his house, but he visited its Bering Sea town of Provideniya in the 1980s with a local envoy.

"We broke the ice curtain here first," he boasted.

Lew Tobin. Remember the name. If McCain and Palin prevail, they might look to Nome for a new U.S. ambassador to Russia.

But Tobin, who teaches vocational education to villagers, is no Palin supporter.

"We've had so long a time of people who've gotten by on charisma," he said. "We want someone who's smart again."

In her Nugget editorial this week, McGuire took on the Democrats and the Republicans for their packs of lies and twisted truths in the presidential campaign. But she neatly harpooned Palin, contending that her comments on Alaskan energy production were flat wrong and her line about Russia was embarrassing.

"Someone please whack her over the head with a geography book," McGuire wrote.

She ended the editorial with this observation:

"Palin is woefully under-qualified to be anywhere near the Oval Office. It kind of makes you want to go out and find a moose and put lipstick on it."



Photo by MYUNG J. CHUN / Los Angeles Times

Los Angeles Times columnist Steve Lopez strains for a view across the Bering Strait from Nome, Alaska, hoping to catch a glimpse of Russia, a spoof on Gov. Sarah Palin's claim she can see Russia from her home state.

CRASH: Feds seeking a solution

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system, and the economy as a whole."

Congress failed to act and he was right. Now the American taxpayer is currently in the business of buying up bad loans and defaulted mortgages.

This is bad precedent. But bad precedent trumps a dismal economy any day.

Contrary to what Barack Obama and his cheerleaders in the media continue to portray, the fundamentals of the economy are overall exuberantly sound. Gross domestic product grew 4.4 percent in the first two quarters of this year. Adhering to the definition of a recession (two consecutive quarters of negative GDP growth), America is not currently in one.

Obama's growing habit of equating America's current

economic predicament (a nation with a growing gross domestic product) to that of the Great Depression is quite an erroneous exaggeration.

Chairman of the Federal Reserve Ben Bernanke and Secretary of Treasury Henry Paulson stepped in before this mini-crisis could inflict harm upon the economy and essentially main street USA. They intervened before Obama's fantasy became reality.

The underlying lesson of this whole thing is that free markets work best when they are not tampered with by Washington. After this mess is cleaned up, we can't rely on dumping grounds for old politicians to manage sectors of the economy that should be left up to the private sector.

We don't need more government. We need accountability and privatization.