

Outrage: Donald Trump's Arctic expansions

The incoming president's threat of annexing Greenland appeals to the techno-colonialism of his Silicon Valley backers, writes [Jan-Werner Müller](#)



Donald Trump Jr landed in Nuuk on 7 January 2025 on what was described as a 'private day trip' to Greenland. His father had just restated an ambition to control the autonomous territory, part of the kingdom of Denmark. 'Greenland belongs to the Greenlanders,' Greenland's Prime Minister Múte Egede later wrote on Facebook.

When, in 2019, Donald Trump first announced his desire to purchase Greenland, the reaction was laughter. Now that he is threatening to use tariffs and possibly military force against Denmark, a NATO ally, the notion of making America territorially greater again no longer seems so funny. Observers cannot quite decide whether this apparent throwback to an age of unashamed imperialism is a way to distract from brewing scandals – Trump's manifestly unqualified cabinet picks, his family and cronies exploiting the presidency for self-enrichment – or whether it is [a smart move](#) by a self-declared 'very stable genius' to remake global geopolitics. Journalists have begun earnestly asking

experts to [calculate the costs](#) of the purchase and assess risks of military invasion. What has been missed is the connection between Trump's expansionism and the settler colonial fantasies long cultivated by the very Silicon Valley figures who today put their financial weight behind MAGA.

Trump is not the first US president to want to grab Greenland, nor is he the only Republican in living memory to do so: 1992 presidential candidate Pat Buchanan – whose combination of relentless culture war and ethno-nationalism anticipated MAGA – sought an extension to Greenland and Canada. Still, Trump's apparently transactional approach – foreign policy as deal-making in real estate – marks a break with post-1945 US strategy. As the winds of decolonisation were blowing around the globe after 1945, Washington relinquished its largest overseas possession, the Philippines; rather than holding on to territory, it created a global network of military outposts to guard what admirers came to call 'the liberal international order'. Even the instigators of the second Iraq War strenuously denied any desire for colonies: Donald Rumsfeld declared that 'we don't use our force and go around the world and try to take other people's real estate'. His boss, George W Bush, insisted that 'we're not an imperial power'.

They were not so obviously wrong: in the 20th century, the US did not acquire any major territory after they purchased what is now the US Virgin Islands during the First World War (from Denmark, as it happens). But Washington still created what historians have called a 'pointillist empire', the points being the more than 800 US bases around the globe. Qaanaaq (formerly known as Thule) in Greenland was one of them. As the historian Daniel Immerwahr has [reminded us](#), to create the northernmost US base, the Indigenous Inughuit community was removed to a 'New Thule' some 100km north; despite a Danish nuclear-free policy and Soviet threats, the US started flying nuclear-armed B-52s over Greenland (with [tacit consent](#) from Copenhagen).

'Greenland holds great potential for what the political theorist Tristan Hughes calls techno-colonialism'

It has not been difficult to rationalise Trump's claims on the world's largest island: it holds plenty of rare earth elements, but is inhabited by a population of a mere 57,000 people. Some locals immediately voiced support for joining the US, when one of Trump's sons – the least business-savvy one, but good enough for colonial adventures – and a posse of far-right grifters took a 'private day trip' to the icy island. As it turned out, the Greenlanders who posed with them in red MAGA hats were unhoused locals [bribed with a meal](#) at a nice

restaurant in [Nuuk](#). To be sure, there is an intensifying [independence movement](#) in Greenland, but the goal is hardly absorption into yet another empire. Some have suggested that the US could move migrants to Greenland; others keep emphasising its sheer [strategic importance](#) – especially if, as a result of global heating, the Northwest Passage opens up.

There is something else, though: Greenland holds great potential for what the political theorist Tristan Hughes calls [techno-colonialism](#). The masters of Silicon Valley have long sought space for creating new communities based on libertarian ideals. As long as planetary travel remains a dream, the only options have been sovereign countries ceding parts of their territory – resulting in private ‘charter cities’ such as those in Honduras – or setting out for the high seas. Anarcho-capitalist Patri Friedman established the [Seasteading Institute](#) in 2008, partly financed by tech billionaire Peter Thiel. A company called Praxis, which also gets to play with Thiel money, has promised to set up ‘city-cryptostates’ (none has materialised so far). One of its founders, Dryden Brown, recently [tweeted](#) that ‘Praxis would like to support Greenland’s development by co-ordinating talent, companies and capital to help secure the Arctic, extract critical resources, terraform the land with advanced technology to make it more habitable, and build a mythical city in the North’.

Trump, too, is interested in building what can only be called mythical cities. His 2024 election platform promised the creation of 10 new cities in the US, with flying cars thrown in for good measure. No further details have been announced, but these so-called ‘[Freedom Cities](#)’ would likely follow the template of ‘opportunity zones’ from Trump’s first term: tax breaks and minimal regulations creating a playground for private developers. Greenland could serve the same purpose: revive the frontier spirit – make real men go out in the wilderness again – give the tech bros a space to experiment (especially with AI), and maybe add a casino. But, above all: make settler colonialism great again.

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