Two Senators and the Boeing Company: The Transformation of Washington’s Political Culture
Columbia Magazine, Winter 1997-98: Vol. 11, No. 4

By Richard S. Kirkendall

IN 1934 A Democratic senator from the state of Washington, Homer T. Bone of Tacoma, denounced the Boeing Company on the floor of the United States Senate but did not suffer any political damage. A quarter of a century later another Washington senator, Henry M. Jackson of Everett, also a Democrat, began to be criticized as "the senator from Boeing" but held onto his popularity with the voters. The contrast between one popular senator's negative relationship with a corporation and another's positive ties with the same firm reflects the rise of the company between 1934 and 1958 and the development in the state of a sense of dependence on Boeing. The contrast also testifies to a change in Washington’s political culture from progressivism to liberalism.

Senator Bone attacked Boeing in February and March of 1934. He referred repeatedly on February 20 to an unnamed "air-plane factory" that had "made 90 percent profit out of the Govt." and proclaimed that he did not want his country to be "helpless in the face of the inordinate and extortionate demands of privately owned airplane companies." On March, 6 the senator went further, he named names. As part of a broader attack on firms that did business with the federal government, he charged that Boeing had made profits of 68 percent on navy business and 90 percent in its dealings with the army, and he complained about the company's employment, at $25,000 per year, of a vice president to solicit business from the federal government. For the Tacoma Democrat, money and politics mixed in alarming ways.

The attack on Boeing related to other themes in the senator's thinking. They concerned electricity and war. The nation, he insisted, must turn to government for the production of electrical power; it must also isolate itself from war.

Born in 1883, Bone had championed public power since his days as a law student. He became a state leader on the issue during the 1920s, helped to persuade Washington Democrats to make this their major plank by the 1930s, and contributed to major victories on the issue in the state and nation during the Depression decade. He saw electricity as a resource of enormous value that should become widely available so as to promote economic development and raise standards of living.

To Bone, electricity seemed too important to be left under private control. Only public ownership would make it widely available at a low price. He fought many battles with the private power companies, denounced them as "the power trust" and threats to the American way of life and the private enterprise system, and castigated them for using money to influence politics. Firms such as Puget Sound Power and Light and the Washington Water Power Company provided some of his favorite targets.
The senator also worked to isolate the United States from war. His family had suffered seriously from America's wars of the 19th century, especially the Civil War, and he regarded World War I and America's participation in it as great mistakes that must not be repeated. They had enriched "a comparatively small group of men" and imposed huge costs "death, debt and taxes" on everyone else.

Bone was not a pacifist. He advocated the strengthening of the defense system in the Pacific Northwest and, as a member of the Senate Naval Affairs Committee, supported the expansion of the navy in 1934. He was, however, determined to deprive the munitions makers and other business groups of opportunities to make profits from war.

With this goal in mind, the senator from Tacoma became a member of the Senate Special Committee to Investigate the Munitions Industry, chaired by Republican Gerald P. Nye of North Dakota. Bone joined the committee in April 1934, shortly after his attack on the Boeing Company, and served until 1936. He hoped above all to drive the munitions makers out of business by shifting production of the instrument of national defense to government-owned facilities. His experience with public power encouraged him to believe that the government could do the job successfully and at a lower price; his suspicions persuaded him that government regulation would not be adequate, for the regulated would control the regulators. The change from private to public manufacturing would enable the United States to develop an adequate defense system without giving private business a chance to exploit the government and would reduce the possibility of war by removing profit-making opportunities from it.

To keep the United States out of war, Bone pressed for additional measures as well. He worked with Nye and others for neutrality legislation to prevent munitions makers and bankers from doing business with belligerent nations and pushing the nation into war as he believed they had in 1917. He backed a proposed amendment to the United States Constitution (the Ludlow Amendment) that would mandate a popular referendum before the nation could go to war. Designed to reduce the ability of industrial and financial groups with a vested interest in war to shape decisions of war and peace, it assumed the American people would vote to fight only when a foreign foe seriously threatened the national interest.

In 1938 the senator cooperated with the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the Scripps newspapers, among others, in an effort to redefine the American military frontier. He hoped to terminate a policy of using American forces to protect Americans doing business in war zones such as China. Along this same line, he opposed what he saw as efforts to carry the military buildup to a point that would permit the United States to "police the world." His military policy would limit American forces to the amount needed for defense of the Western Hemisphere.

Bone frequently warned against involvement in another world war. It would destroy "democracy," "the Republic" and "our civilization." It would force the Roosevelt administration to "abandon its efforts to make America a better place for all of us." According to his understanding of the world, democracy and isolation depended on one another. If the nation were truly democratic, it would go to war only when its genuine interests demanded that it do so; if it isolated itself from wars favored only by special interests, it could make itself more democratic.

ONE IDEA LINKED the three themes: the criticism of The Boeing Company, the promotion of public power and the effort to keep the United States out of war. It was the idea that business corrupts politics. This had been a major way of thinking when Bone moved into politics in the early 20th century, and for him the idea had not lost its validity. He had not accommodated himself to corporate power. In the 1930s concern about that power as a force for corruption remained the central theme in his thinking and brought him into cooperation in the Senate with progressives like Nye, George Norris of Nebraska, and "Young Bob" La Follette of Wisconsin.
The behavior of Washington voters suggests that Bone's point of view made great sense to most of them. The state did not deserve Jim Parley's designation as "the soviet of Washington," but it had a vigorous left and a dominant progressivism. One illustration of the latter was the enthusiasm for public power; another, the support for Homer Bone.

The voters had elected Bone to the United States Senate in 1932 as a Democrat even though some established Democrats in the state doubted that he was one of them. He had been a Socialist in his early days, a member of the Farmer-Labor party in the early 1920s, a supporter of "Old Bob" LaFollette for the presidency in 1924, and an unsuccessful candidate for Congress in 1928 as an anti-Hoover Republican. He had not decided to run as a Democrat in 1932 until the party nominated Franklin Roosevelt for the presidency and thereby persuaded Bone that it had become the progressive party. He defeated three long-time Democrats in the primary by a wide margin and went on to triumph over the Republican incumbent in the fall, obtaining 60 percent of the vote and running ahead of all other Democrats in the state, including Roosevelt.

After his attack on Boeing and other illustrations of his point of view, Bone enjoyed reelection in 1938. And he did so in spite of persistent doubts about his loyalty to the Democratic Party. He did oppose the president on some big issues, such as neutrality legislation. Nevertheless, he defeated his Democratic opponent in the primary by a margin of more than four to one. Then he obtained 63 percent of the vote against a conservative Republican in the fall election. It appears that most politically active Washingtonians regarded him as a faithful representative of their values.

TWO DECADES LATER Washington voters had a similar amount of enthusiasm for another, quite different Democratic senator. By then Washington had changed in major ways, and no change was more important than the spectacular growth of the Boeing Company. It had been only a small firm in an economy dominated by timber when Bone attacked it in 1934; by 1958 it had become a corporate giant.

When Bone launched his attack, Boeing was not an insignificant part of Seattle. With nearly 1,000 people on its payroll, it was the largest manufacturing firm and employer in the state. Furthermore, the Seattle press had considerable enthusiasm for aviation, military preparedness and air power, and the company defended itself to the satisfaction of the House Naval Affairs Committee against charges that it had exploited the navy.

The company was not, however, so important in 1934 that the leading papers in the city lashed out at the senator from Tacoma for his attack. The Times admired William Boeing, the company's founder, praising him in an editorial on February 22, 1934, as the "out-standing living pioneer" in his industry and a "truly big man." But while the paper criticized Boeing's other critics, it ignored Bone's harsh words. The Post-Intelligencer opposed the senator's proposal for government manufacture of naval aircraft, fearing that it would shift production to areas with greater political clout and thus damage Seattle as well as Boeing, but the paper ignored what Bone said about the company. The Star also paid no attention to the senator's words of February and March 1934, even though the company complained to the paper about them and despite the fact that it, a part of the Scripps chain, shared his belief that business, including aircraft companies, corrupted politics.

In the 1930s a leading Washington politician could get away with an attack on the Boeing Company, but by 1958 the situation had changed. Boeing had become a corporate giant, employing over 60,000 people in Seattle and vicinity. It was now much more important to the state than the timber and wood products industry and faced no challenger to its position as the city's and the state's leading manufacturer. Boeing was so important to metropolitan Seattle that Business Week called the place a "one-industry town."
Moreover, the people of Seattle and Washington state had developed a sense of dependence on the firm. This had been demonstrated dramatically only a few years before, in 1949, when the United States Air Force appeared intent on moving bomber production to the company's plant in Wichita, Kansas. The plan generated an enormous protest that stretched across class lines to many segments of the local population, including organized labor and the chamber of commerce. Pressure against such a move came from all over the state.

Henry Jackson, then a fifth-term congressman from the Second District, participated in the battle to keep bomber production in Seattle. He did so in cooperation with Democratic congressman Hugh Mitchell from the First District and Democratic senator Warren Magnuson, the recognized leader on the issue in the nation's capital. Jackson's participation helped him move up to the United States Senate by defeating incumbent Harry Cain in 1952.

By then Jackson maintained, as did many of his contemporaries, that the "lessons of history" clearly dictated that the United States must not repeat the great mistake of the past: the weak response to aggression in the 1930s. He had expressed this opinion in rallying immediately behind President Truman's decision to intervene in the Korean War in June 1950, and he continued to back the American role there, seeing it as a successful deterrent to the spread of communism.

The rising politician consistently and strongly supported a national defense system that emphasized air power. He had backed the air force in the budget battles of 1948 and 1949 and made much of this and of his fight to keep Boeing in Seattle in his highly successful campaign for reelection to the House in 1950, and he promoted the rapid military buildup of the early 1950s. In 1952, he called for even more buildup, especially of atomic and hydrogen bombs. He portrayed such weapons as the centerpiece of American defense forces and insisted that the United States must continue to have more bombs than the Soviet Union. Reliance on them, he argued "as did other champions of air power" would be less expensive than the "conventional" weapons of the army and navy. Jackson's conception of a strong America envisioned a large role for Boeing-built bombers.

By 1958 Jackson, a member of the Senate Armed Forces Committee and the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, had earned recognition as a leading critic of the Eisenhower administration's defense policies. A critic as early as 1953, he escalated his criticism after the Soviet Union launched Sputnik in October 1957. He charged that the administration underestimated the Soviet threat, placed economic considerations ahead of national security, and refused to spend enough for the latter purpose. He was confident that the nation could spend much more on defense without sacrificing domestic programs or damaging the economy.

OFTEN JACKSON'S demands for more defense spending focused on Boeing products, especially the B-52. An eight-engine jet bomber developed in the early 1950s, it had become the company's main product by mid decade and the successor to the B-17 and the B-29 as the firm's major contribution to American air power. By the late years of the decade it was the air force's chief weapon.

Boeing contributed even more products to the American arsenal, and Jackson supported each one. They included the KC-135, a jet tanker, and Bomarc, a ground-to-air missile. Late in the 1958 senatorial campaign, the politician from Everett announced enthusiastically that Boeing was to be the prime contractor for the Minuteman, an intercontinental ballistic missile.

In sharp contrast with Bone, Jackson saw Boeing as a company of vital importance locally and nationally. It served two major interests: the economy of Seattle and Washington state and the security of the nation. Thus he cooperated with company officials, including William Allen, the president, and James Murray, a vice president and the firm's chief lobbyist in the nation's capital, in their quests for profitable contracts. He also
praised the company's managers and workers for their contributions and received their warm words in return, and he boasted during his 1958 reelection campaign, as did the State Democratic Central Committee, that he had served the local interest in jobs as well as the national interest in a stronger defense.

NOT EVERY Washingtonian liked Jackson's role, and some who did not began in 1958 to refer to him as "the senator from Boeing." The designation did not originate with the Republicans, although they had good reason to coin it, given Jackson's criticism of Eisenhower on defense. Looking back, one might speculate that the slogan was an early version of Eisenhower's 1961 warning about the "military-industrial complex." Secretary of Defense Charles E. Wilson came rather close to using the term in 1957 in responding to Jackson and other Democratic critics, but Wilson did not go so far as to insult a major defense contractor by charging that Boeing had Jackson on a leash.

The charge did not originate with Jackson's 1958 Republican foe, William Bantz, a Spokane lawyer and United States attorney. He defended Eisenhower's policies against the incumbent's criticisms, but he surely did not suggest that there was anything wrong with serving Boeing's interests. He insisted that the company's superior work, not Jackson, explained its success, and he opposed a Democratic proposal for a state income tax with the argument that it could drive Boeing from the state.

Bantz criticized Jackson along other lines. He charged that he spread fear, that he was a "big government" liberal with ties to corrupt labor leaders like Dave Beck of the Teamsters Union. He even called Jackson an "appeaser" for what he took to be softness toward the People's Republic of China over who should control islands off the Asian mainland.

Although she came close to using it, the slogan did not originate with Jackson's foe in the Democratic primary, Alice Franklin Bryant. A prisoner of the Japanese during World War II and a Seattle author, lecturer and frequent candidate for political office, Bryant focused much of her attention on a proposal for an immediate end to nuclear weapons testing, and at various points during the campaign she sounded like Homer Bone in the 1930s. She charged that Jackson indulged "in fear-mongering to make us endure the taxation and military service required for the larger armaments he advocates"; she maintained that he was "lingering in a caveman, cops and robbers state of development at a time when the human race will have to grow up or blow up"; she insisted that his efforts on behalf of B-52s was evidence of a "single-track militaristic mind"; she proclaimed that he was "helping to make Seattle a prime H-bomb target"; and she charged that his activities favored "those who profit from the threat of war - General Electric at Hanford and Boeing at Seattle." Nevertheless, she insisted that she wanted Boeing to prosper. It should do so, she maintained, by shifting out of bombers and missiles and into passenger planes. She did not portray it as a business that corrupted politicians.

Other people in as well as out of the state argued by 1958 that ties with Boeing, not concern for the national interest, explained the senator's behavior, and the slogan itself originated among Democrats in western Washington who regarded him as a militaristic warmonger. The 43rd District Democratic Club in Seattle was one center of this line of thought. Many members feared the arms race and believed that Jackson was hurting the party with his emphasis on a military buildup. Early in the year some Democrats in the Puget Sound area who thought in this way began to call Jackson "the senator from Boeing."

Bone's point of view had not disappeared from Washington politics. One Democrat wrote at the time that it appeared "that the so-called capitalistic system could not function without this colossal spending for so-called defense." Another Democrat reported a "strong protest" against Jackson's "Daddy Warbucks type of sabre rattling."
The label exaggerated Jackson's connections with Boeing. He actually had a complex agenda that included support for the army and the navy as well as the company's chief market - the air force. It also included nonmilitary approaches to the Soviet challenge and a number of domestic programs, beginning with public power. He blamed the impression that he was narrowly focused on military power on his committee assignments and the tendency of the local press to emphasize what he did to help the local economy.

The senator had welcomed those committee assignments and eagerly reported whatever he did for Boeing, but he did oppose the company on a big issue before Washington voters in 1958. This was a proposed "right-to-work" law that would do away with the union shop in the state. President Allen supported the referendum and played a big role in the campaign for it, arguing that "free choice concerning union membership" was "the key to responsible unionism." Jackson opposed the measure, believing it would disrupt the good system of labor-management relations that had developed since the 1930s. The labor movement had become, as liberals like Jackson saw it, a "countervailing power," balancing the corporation, and a major component of a pluralistic America. In the senator's view, Allen's efforts threatened what was now a reformed and good economic and political system. Jackson's stand demonstrated that Boeing's influence on him had limits; the voters' rejection of the proposal testified to limits on the company's influence on them.

Jackson would come to resent being called "the senator from Boeing." The label challenged his conception of himself as serving both the national interest and a number of local interests in a pluralistic society and political system. And it implied that he was controlled by a munitions maker, a variant of the old idea that business corrupts politics.

It is clear that the senator's ties with Boeing and even the charge that he was in the company's pocket did not hurt him in the politics of Washington state in 1958. He defeated Bryant by a margin of nearly six to one. He triumphed over Bantz by more than two to one even though Republicans won six of Washington's seven seats in the House of Representatives.

THE GREAT DIFFERENCE between Homer T. Bone and Henry Jackson in their relations with the Boeing Company suggests that a big change had taken place in the political culture of Washington between the 1930s and the 1950s. Two facts, both men were Democrats and both were unusually popular with the voters, strengthen the case. It was a change from a deep distrust of corporate power to acceptance of a corporate giant. It was a shift away from a conception of the political process as prone to corruption by business to a view of the biggest business in the state as but one of several interests that a senator should serve. What had seemed dangerous now seemed useful. Bone looked upon the rather small firm as a menace, but Jackson viewed the large one as a valuable interest "One among several" that he should serve in a pluralistic system. The contrast between the two men at two different times reflects, in short, a transformation of the political culture from progressivism to liberalism.

A native of Spokane and a graduate of Gonzaga University, Richard S. Kirkendall is the Scott and Dorothy Bullitt Professor of American History at the University of Washington.

MLA Citation: