

[MUSIC PLAYING]

SARAH BALDWIN: From the Watson Institute at Brown University, this is Trending Globally. I'm Sarah Baldwin. Even by our current standards for presidential news, this was a weird one.

SPEAKER 1: We learned this week that President Trump has been asking advisors about acquiring Greenland.

DONALD TRUMP: So the concept came up, and I said, certainly, I'd be. Strategically, it's interesting.

SPEAKER 2: Could President Trump possibly be interested in having America buy Greenland.

DONALD TRUMP: Essentially, it's a large real estate deal, and while he promised on Twitter not to build the Trump Tower on the Arctic island, the proposal's been met with disbelief by some.

SPEAKER 3: That bid was publicly rejected by Denmark's prime minister.

SPEAKER 4: Donald Trump abruptly and on Twitter canceled a planned state visit to Denmark, apparently because the Danish prime minister didn't want to talk about Greenland and selling it to the United States.

SARAH BALDWIN: But according to political scientist Jeff Colgan, there's more to this story than meets the eye. On this episode, the surprising history of America's relationship to the world's biggest island. We talk about the Cold War, nuclear waste, and the problem with trying to build train tracks inside of a glacier. The relationship between the US and Greenland is more complicated than most people know, and it's going to matter more and more in the coming decades. This might have been the first time you heard about Greenland on the nightly news, but it probably won't be the last. Here's Jeff.

JEFF COLGAN: Well, I think it's a bad idea at a whole variety of levels. It's a very strangely, sort of, 19th century idea of countries buying other you know colonies or pieces of territory. And I think that's really problematic for a lot of reasons. But the one I want to talk about is really about climate change and about the kind of Cold War legacy that the United States has in Greenland. And even today, the United States has an airbase, Tula airbase in Greenland, and continues to be a major part of the US arctic strategy of course.

SARAH BALDWIN: So it's an active base.

JEFF COLGAN: It's an active base even today. But in the Cold War, the US was much more active, and in 1951 signed an agreement, a treaty with Denmark saying that the United States would have a special role in the defense of Greenland. And of course, the United States wasn't interested in defending Greenland. It was really interested in kind of forward positioning some bases in the context of the Cold War with the Soviet Union.

SARAH BALDWIN: Geographically, that makes sense. Did everyone see through that or is that irrelevant?

JEFF COLGAN: Yeah, it was transparent to everybody, and it came really out of the Second World War though because the Nazis had actually invaded Greenland during the war. And so there really was a sort of active discussion after the war about the United States potentially been taking over Greenland even at that point, which is why Truman had sort of similar thoughts to Trump but for different motivations.

SARAH BALDWIN: So in 1951 this treaty was signed and then the US proceeded to build a base.

JEFF COLGAN: Yes, many bases in fact. Its major concern was first getting radar stations up and sort of early warning systems, because of course the concern at this point was nuclear warfare. And in particular in those days this was before the development of Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles, ICBMs, so nuclear bombs were dropped by bombers by planes. And so having radar stations up in the Arctic was really important, because that was of course the shortest geographic distance for the Soviet Union to come over the pole and attack the United States. And so there was a whole system of radar stations that went from Alaska all the way through Canada and into Greenland to help, sort of, station this kind of early warning system.

SARAH BALDWIN: So that was defensive.

JEFF COLGAN: That was defensive. Exactly right. And then there were a couple of secret military sites that were much more offensive, and the most important of which was Camp Century. And Camp Century was built in the late 50s and run through the early 60s and then it was shut down, but it was ostensibly a research station, a joint project between the United States and the Danish government.

SARAH BALDWIN: Research?

JEFF COLGAN: Research. So much so that even Walter Cronkite, the legendary anchorman from CBS, went to camp century and did a public report on it all about learning about ice and conditions that

soldiers might have to fight in wintry conditions.

SARAH BALDWIN: So it was really a cover.

JEFF COLGAN: It was all a cover, because in fact the real purpose of this thing was to explore the idea of creating a nuclear missile launch base. They're going to be up to 600 medium range nuclear missiles positioned at this base, and to make things a little more interesting they were going to mount these missiles on a train that was going to be moving around 3,000 kilometers of track constantly.

SARAH BALDWIN: On the ice sheet?

JEFF COLGAN: Not on the ice sheet, in the ice sheet. So they were going to build tunnels through the ice sheet to keep this thing constantly moving and very hard to detect, and so that the Soviet Union couldn't counter attack and eliminate these missiles. But this whole scheme, I mean, if you just step back for like half a second, this is something straight out of James Bond, right. I mean, it's just--

SARAH BALDWIN: That's actually what it sounds like.

JEFF COLGAN: Right. Just insane plot. And fortunately or unfortunately, the whole scheme was made redundant fairly quickly, because ICBMs were developed. And these medium range nuclear missiles were no longer needed to be so close to Russia, because now they could be launched from the United States homeland and still reach Russia.

SARAH BALDWIN: But they had been built and taken there, right, so they were-- no.

JEFF COLGAN: No missiles were ever actually positioned, but there was a nuclear reactor, a power reactor civilian nuclear-- well, it's military, but it was a power generating reactor to run the electricity and the lights and everything on this base where there were up to 200 military personnel soldiers stationed at the site as they started to work on this base.

SARAH BALDWIN: So it was big.

JEFF COLGAN: It was big, and when they decommissioned it, they thought look this is just in the middle of nowhere. It's like 150 miles inland from the coast, so there's nobody there. I mean, it's completely isolated location. So they thought we'll decommission the most important parts of the reactor.

We'll take out the fuel rods, and we'll ship them back. But everything else, tens of thousands of liters of diesel fuel and some radioactive waste water and lots and lots of PCBs, we're just going to leave. We're just going to leave it on the ice sheet. It's going to snow year after year, and this waste will get buried.

SARAH BALDWIN: Encased in ice forevermore.

JEFF COLGAN: Forever more.

SARAH BALDWIN: And what year was this?

JEFF COLGAN: And so that was around 1963, 1964, so mid 1960s. And in fairness to them, it seemed like it made sense. Because sure enough ever since that waste has been descending from the surface of the ice sheet as more and more snow creeps on the ice sheet, and it's now something like 30 meters deep.

SARAH BALDWIN: Oh, so it's considerably buried-- well buried.

JEFF COLGAN: Yes, and so if you went to Camp Century today, you would see nothing but snow and some scientific instruments that have been set up since to monitor it. But otherwise, it's pretty much abandoned.

SARAH BALDWIN: OK, and no one's there.

JEFF COLGAN: No one is there, not on a year round basis. Researchers go about once a year.

SARAH BALDWIN: But the ice sheet is melting.

JEFF COLGAN: The ice sheet is melting. That was the big wrinkle that they couldn't have foreseen or didn't foresee let's say that in the 1960s was that climate change was going to come along. And now we can see that eventually this waste is going to resurface, and the toxins are going to re-mobilize and meaning they're going to get into the water supply in the future, right. This is not going to happen today or even tomorrow. This is probably decades away. But this is still very much a concern for Greenlanders knowing that this waste is coming back to haunt them.

SARAH BALDWIN: For Greenlanders, and isn't it a concern for everyone since it will go into the ocean and then the sea level will rise somewhere else and that'll cause secondary consequences if we can call them that. They don't feel secondary I suppose if you're a tall is the one going under, but.

JEFF COLGAN: Yeah, that's exactly right. And so if nothing is done about this in terms of, sort of, remediation and cleanup, then ultimately the science suggests that this is going to get re-mobilized. The waste will go back into the ocean, including a whole lot of PCBs and some radioactive waste water. It will probably-- it has the potential of reaching both Canada and Greenland, and who knows how far it spreads from there? We don't want to go down that path. Let's put it that way.

But there is a real question here about, well, if there is going to be a cleanup, then who pays.

SARAH BALDWIN: Right, and how much would it cost, but also whose responsibility is it?

JEFF COLGAN: Exactly. And so this comes back down to the real issue, because of course it's always about the dollars. And that's why it's interesting that Democratic Senator Tom Carper wrote in May to the GAO, the General Accountability Office asking for a report, not just about Camp Century but about generally, what are the, sort of, unfunded liabilities that the United States is starting to accrue because of its military bases or military activities around the world that climate change is now going to surface or create in some way.

SARAH BALDWIN: So where else? What is the extent of this across the world?

JEFF COLGAN: Yeah, so this is one of those things that I call knock on effects, because it's, sort of, like the in Don Rumsfeld's terms, the unknown unknowns, right. We're starting to know a little bit about what to expect from climate change. Not much of it is very good so that's worrisome unto its own. But we're also starting to realize that this kind of thing, this, sort of, remote problem in Greenland is not going to be remote forever, that there's going to be many of these other kinds of secondary or knock on effects where climate change interacts with industrial pollution or other kinds of infrastructure.

SARAH BALDWIN: Is there any viable argument against the United States responsibility for re-mediating-- for paying for the remediation of its military bases?

JEFF COLGAN: So typically the Pentagon takes a very hard line on this issues, because it knows that it's a slippery slope, right. That it faces environmental issues with all of its many, many military bases. The US has a overseas network of bases that's roughly 600 bases, and to answer your earlier question just to come back to that, one of the other places that we're concerned about climate change.

So we talked about Greenland and the Arctic. That seems remote now we go to the other side where you can look at the Pacific Ocean around the equator, particularly around the Marshall

Islands and other islands in the Pacific where a lot of nuclear testing was done in the 1950s and, sort of, the heyday of nuclear testing. Much of the damage or much of the, sort of, radioactive material, that kind of act of plutonium that's still there on these islands or there in the [INAUDIBLE] that are, kind of, low lying islands. Those are in some sense contained. Often they're just what's kind of like a concrete dome placed over them, but those islands are now of course sinking on some level right or the sea level-- more properly, the sea levels are rising.

And some of them are experiencing overwash. Some of them see much more storm damage, and that means that the material-- radioactive material that once was contained on those locations is now much, much more likely to be mobilized and get into the Pacific Ocean. And so again, we should all be concerned about that. None more so than the residents of the Marshall Islands whose water could very much be polluted by radioactive material.

SARAH BALDWIN: And so who-- I don't know for sure it is the right word, but who might foot the bill.

JEFF COLGAN: So in general and in particular, I've published on this issue with Greenland a couple of times now. The Pentagon I know that reporters have asked the Pentagon for comment on it, and they simply say that they're aware of the report and they don't comment further. And so they are not accepting responsibility at least at this point.

SARAH BALDWIN: Is that a result of this administration, or is that a reflection of the Pentagon's, sort of, innate defensiveness?

JEFF COLGAN: The second. This is a longstanding issue. And there's even a clause in that 1951 treaty with Denmark, between the US and Denmark about how the US has, kind of, a right to leave waste and it's Denmark's problem to deal with it. Except that-- this is-- and this is where lawyers might have a field day-- the United States had a particular geographic area that it was supposed to work with, and Camp Century is outside of that designated area. And on top of that, the United States was supposed to consult with Denmark about what it was doing, and it, in fact, never told Denmark that it had a plan to have nuclear weapons, nuclear material at Camp Century.

SARAH BALDWIN: So I don't know if you like to make policy recommendations, but maybe a prediction. What should be done about this? At least let's just take Camp Century, or you could answer this just as a policy that affects, the covers all military bases around the world where these secondary consequences are going to start to be felt.

JEFF COLGAN: Right. So one thing that makes sense is to try to provide some certainty or at least expectations for Greenlanders, right. They're going to want to know this is their land that's being polluted. They want to know who's going to take responsibility. And so ultimately that comes down to a discussion I think between Copenhagen and Washington, right.

So Denmark and United States need to have some sort of agreement about who's going to pay for this. Likely-- and this is going to mean that Denmark is formally in charge of remediation. That's my expectation just because of the history of the Pentagon's operations that they're going to want nothing to do with this to the extent they can, but what they have done in the past and they did this with Canada when they were closing down some of those other early warning radar stations in the Arctic what the United States did was to cut Canada a big check that wasn't formally about this because they didn't want to set a precedent about environmental cleanups, but there was no question about what it was for.

SARAH BALDWIN: And do you know how much that check was for?

JEFF COLGAN: That check was for \$100 million.

SARAH BALDWIN: And how does that compare to what you think might be necessary in Greenland?

JEFF COLGAN: Yeah, we actually don't know. There's no good estimate about what the cost is. And that's the logical question is how much money is on the table. And the science is at such an early stage right now, and here I'm really talking about, sort of, the geophysical and glaciology, the sciences associated with this. It's at still such an early stage that we don't have anything close to a cost estimate of what it will take to clean this up.

SARAH BALDWIN: And are scientists envisioning techniques and methods and how to go about this?

JEFF COLGAN: Yeah, so the first thing is just to, sort of, map like where is the waste, because of course it's traveled and it was never totally clear where the site was. And so I think the scientists that are working on it now have a lot of guesswork. They've located the sort of biggest debris field associated with the base, but there's much work to be done to figure out what exactly is down there.

Part of what they're working with is old US army reports of here's what we did. Here's what we left. But those reports and what they actually did aren't guaranteed to be the same thing.

SARAH BALDWIN: I was picturing when you first started doing this work, I pictured like rusty oil cans poking up

out in the ice. But to know that it's 30 meters down is almost worse. It has such a heavier moral weight in a way.

JEFF COLGAN: Yeah.

SARAH BALDWIN: Because you could say, I'm not going to be here in three decades. Not my problem.

JEFF COLGAN: Well, I'm sure that's what almost every politician associated with it will do exactly that. But what I think the smart thing to do is to say look we're not going to clean it up until it's closer to the actual surface, but we could at least you know set in the framework of like who's going to do it and some kind of plan for it so that the Greenlanders have clear expectations and others have clear expectations about this.

SARAH BALDWIN: Is there any involvement of indigenous people or Greenlanders generally?

JEFF COLGAN: Well, so the indigenous politics in Greenland remain very contentious and kind of unhappy story. Greenland since the 1950s has changed a lot. Its status in 1953 it became officially part of the kingdom of Denmark, but then in 1979 it had a referendum for home rule. And in 2009, it made another step towards full autonomy. But its foreign policy is still very much run by Denmark and it still receives a very large subsidy from Denmark each year. And so that's really the fundamental link between them and why Greenlanders have second thoughts about independence.

And so for them climate change is a very complicated issue, because it actually changes their home much more dramatically there than we experience at these latitudes. But it also creates some opportunities, and it opens up mining operations. And of course, there's all kinds of companies that are really interested in what kinds of things they might exploit. And I think environmentalists in the United States naturally sort of the first reaction is concern about that. But for Greenlanders, they see the dollar signs associated with that. So they see it as quite positive, so it's a complicated-- very complicated.

SARAH BALDWIN: One last question I have is, do you think President Trump suddenly wanted to buy Greenland because of his own inquisitiveness or because he's heard the reports and is a climate change quasi denalist.

JEFF COLGAN: Yeah, so this is, I mean, on one level putting too much analytic power into trying to figure out what's going on in Donald Trump's head. It's terrifying. So I don't like to speculate too much. But if you think that this is the last time that we will hear of people, whether it's Trump or

otherwise, interested in buying land that is going to become more attractive, more economically attractive as climate change unfolds, then I think we're greatly mistaken, right. So that, in fact, this is probably not the first or the last time that we're going to see this kind of behavior that people are actually thinking about, well, where can I make money off of this brave new world that we're moving into where climate change is dramatically reshaping our planet's environment?

SARAH BALDWIN: Well, it's a really complicated issue with many aspects, and I'm really grateful that you came in today to talk to us about many of them. Thank you.

JEFF COLGAN: Thanks so much for having me.

SARAH BALDWIN: This episode of Trending Globally was produced by Dan Richards. Our theme music is by Henry Bloomfield. I'm Sarah Baldwin. You can subscribe to us on iTunes, Stitcher, or your favorite podcast app.

If you like what you hear, leave us a rating and review on iTunes. It really helps others find the show. For more information about this and other shows, go to watson.brown.edu. Thanks for listening and tune in in two weeks for another episode of Trending Globally.

[MUSIC PLAYING]