The Purchase of Alaska

Background Information
In 1866 the Russian government offered to sell the territory of Alaska to the United States. Secretary of State William H. Seward, enthusiastic about the prospects of American expansion, negotiated the deal for the Americans. Edouard de Stoeckl, Russian minister to the United States, negotiated for the Russians. On March 30, 1867, the two parties agreed that the United States would pay Russia $7.2 million for the territory of Alaska.

For less than two cents an acre, the United States acquired nearly 600,000 square miles. Opponents of the Alaska Purchase persisted in calling it “Seward's Folly” or “Seward's Icebox” until 1896, when the great Klondike Gold Strike convinced even the harshest critics that Alaska was a valuable addition to American territory.

Document 1
The Cession of Russian America

A speech by Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, delivered to the United States Senate on April 8, 1867.

Excerpt

The Climate...by which the rigors of that coast are tempered to a mildness unknown in the same latitude on the Atlantic side; then, the Vegetable Products, so far as known, chief among which are forests of pine and fir waiting for the ax; then the Mineral Products, among which are coal and copper, if not iron, silver, lead, and gold, besides the two great products of New England, “granite and ice;” then the Furs, including precious skins of the Black Fox and Sea Otter, which originally tempted the settlement, and have remained to this day the exclusive object of pursuit; and lastly, the Fisheries, which, in waters superabundant with animal life beyond any of the globe, seem to promise a new commerce to the country.
Document 2
On the Purchase of Alaska

A speech by Representative N. P. Banks of Massachusetts, delivered to the House of Representatives June 30, 1868.

Excerpt

It is necessary for the defense of this country, for the preservation of its institutions and its power. It cannot in the nature of things remain with perfect certainty, and possibly not for a long time, in the possession of Russia. It is likely to be conceded and transferred to some other Power, and it is indispensable to us that in such an event it should in the nature of things be transferred to the United States.

Document 3
Seward at Washington as Secretary of State:
A Memoir of His Life, with Selections from His Letters, 1861–1872

Excerpt

But the purchase of the new territory was not consummated without a storm of raillery in conversation and ridicule in the press. Russian-America was declared to be a “barren, worthless, God-forsaken region,” whose only products were “icebergs and polar bears.” The ground was “frozen six feet deep,” and the “streams were glaciers.” “Walrussia” was suggested as a fitting name for it, if it deserved to have any. Vegetation was “confined to mosses” and “no useful animals could live there.” There might be some few “wretched fish”... but nothing could be raised or dug there... It was “Seward’s folly.” It was Johnson’s “polar bear garden.”

Questions:
• What were the arguments in support of the purchase of Alaska?
• What were the arguments in opposition to the purchase of Alaska?