

**EVEN** while standing on Navy Pier looking out across Lake Michigan, it is easy to forget that Chicago was once a major port on the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence Seaway. Regional "lakers" and international "salties" navigating the Seaway do still call in ports on Chicago's South Side and in East Chicago, Gary, and Burns Harbor, as the Midwestern industrial and agricultural corridors continue to import and export oil, grain, chemicals, steel, and various bulk cargo. But Chicago as a bustling inland seaport is as forgotten as the wrecks of the Lady Elgin, the Eastland, and the Seabird not far from her shores. Formerly active ports like Chicago, Rochester, and Milwaukee illustrate how industry changes, land usage shifts and once-revered large-scale projects like the Seaway, the Illinois and Michigan Canal or the Tennessee Valley Authority eventually fall out of favor.

Fifty years old this past summer, the St. Lawrence Seaway stretches over 2000 miles from Lake Superior, through each of the Great Lakes and along the St. Lawrence River, connecting ports like Duluth, Thunder Bay, Chicago, Detroit, Buffalo and Toronto to the Atlantic Ocean and to ports all over the world. Once marveled for its colossal feats of human engineering, as Midwestern American and Canadian industry and agriculture wane and as dredging, damming and blasting along the waterway irreparably impact ecologies within the lakes and rivers, the economic and environmental feasibility of the Seaway have come under intense scrutiny. In fact, the project's economic sustainability was subject to fierce debate even before construction began.<sup>1</sup> By 1994, on the Seaway's thirty-fifth anniversary, Canadian parliament went so far as to suggest that, unless economic viability changed, the system ought to be shut down.<sup>2</sup>

The Seaway's history provides a case study for many of the aspirations for and eventual apprehensions with globalization, both real and conjectural. Already blamed for billions of dollars worth of damage to lake and river ecosystems through the introduction of invasive plant and animal species, the Seaway has also raised concerns over a different kind of invasion. Changes in attitude since 2001 about the shared border with Canada have led to hypothesized risks to national security along the waterway, as it cuts an international path directly to the hearts of numerous North American cities.<sup>3</sup> Looking out from Navy Pier at the water intake cribs on the Lake Michigan horizon, much like intake structures off the shores of other Great Lakes cities, it is not hard to imagine how a shipping vessel of unknown origin, obfuscated under international "flag of convenience" laws and, knowingly or not, rigged as a biological weapon or dirty bomb, could exact disaster on the city and the region.

## CHICAGO: AS PORT CITY OF THE WORLD



PORT-CARTIER

BAIE-COMEAU

ST. LAWRENCE RIVER

QUÉBEC

QUÉBEC

MONTRÉAL

SOREL

CORNWALL-MASSENA

VERMONT

NEW BRUNSWICK

MAINE

ONTARIO

NEW YORK

PENNSYLVANIA

# PRECIOUS CARGO

## IN THE GREAT LAKES



**ALARMIST** fantasies of dirty bombs in Midwestern drinking water aside, the Great Lakes do face very real threats to their sustainability. Once again, Chicago is strategically situated, both geographically and historically, along a contested shipping route - only this time water is the cargo.

The Great Lakes contain 21% of the world's supply of surface freshwater.<sup>4</sup> In North America, and especially in cities like Chicago, all that water is taken for granted while much of the world struggles to maintain access to potable sources. The American Southwest, for one, has long been engineering methods for diverting water from remote sources. It is quite likely that, despite fledgling legislation penned to head off such an undertaking, someday a pipeline from the Great Lakes will extend to cities like Las Vegas and Phoenix. Chicago, unfortunately, is already a drain for such a pipeline.

Pipelines sucking water off the Great Lakes are neither new nor unique to Chicago. Just this summer a controversial plan to draw 85 million gallons a day from Lake Huron was approved in Genesee County, Michigan, despite an existing Detroit-based pipeline.<sup>5</sup> Though these pipelines take their toll on lake levels over time, because they remain within the Great Lakes Basin, they are thus very different from a pipeline removing water from the region altogether. In that, Chicago is unique and precedent setting.

Due to the reversal of the Chicago River and the construction of the Sanitary and Ship Canal connecting Lake Michigan to the Mississippi River, Chicago already sends a billion gallons a day to points west and south.<sup>6</sup> Though other plans to ship, bottle, or divert water have typically been defeated in the past, unless the Chicago River is restored to its original flow and the Sanitary Canal abandoned like other such outdated projects as the Erie Canal or the Edwards Dam on the Kennebec River in Maine, Chicago may one day be the geographical and legal gateway to yet another impressive but ill-conceived feat of human engineering.

## CHICAGO: AS DRAIN PIPE OF THE GREAT LAKES

1 "Fallen Hero: The St. Lawrence Seaway at 50," Erin Anderssen, Toronto Globe and Mail; June 27, 2009.  
 2 "The End of the St. Lawrence Seaway?," Canadian Broadcasting Corporation; broadcast date: Nov. 6, 1994.  
 3 "Transportation Vision 2030," RITA: Research and Innovative Technology Administration, January 2008.  
 4 U.S. Environmental Protection Agency statistic: <http://epa.gov/greatlakes/atlas/index.html>  
 5 "Michigan to Suck Water from Huron," Shawn Jeffords, Toronto Sun; August 29, 2009.  
 6 "They Need It. We Waste It," Michael Miner, Chicago Reader; January 12, 2006.