The media attention on Alaska's governor has been torrential. Not wanting to give her any more attention, I'll focus on the geography that shaped her character.

Frommer's Travel Guide to Alaska describes Wasilla as "the worst kind of suburban sprawl of highway-fronting shopping malls and gravel lots." How did this happen? The town's history is the kind of story Mark Twain had in mind when he wrote: "Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities. Truth isn't."

First, some background.

Alaska is so rich from pipeline royalties that it pays annual dividends to its residents instead of taxing them. The state is also rich from the pipeline of federal dollars running north from Washington, D.C. No state has more publicly owned federal land, and therefore more land-controlling bureaucracies. No state was closer to Cold War Russia, which is why so much military money flows north. No state has a more broadly distributed native population, which receives federal cost-sharing. In spite of such government largesse, there is a strong libertarian streak in most residents, many of whom talk openly about seceding from the "Lower 48."

Another background point involves the state capital, Juneau, which cannot be reached by road. Imagine trying to reach Hartford without using a road or bridge. Those heading for Juneau by boat must deal with the ferocious Gulf of Alaska or the cloudy ferry trip along the Inland Passage. Those who fly must thread the needle between ice-covered mountains, bank hard above a fjord (usually in foggy drizzle), and land at sea level in a place where the tide averages over 15 feet. Juneau is a nice city to live in and to disembark at on a cruise, but it's a great challenge for business, coming and going.

Think about the energy inefficiency and political unaccountability of such a location. Every politician, aide, secretary or lobbyist from "outside" must run a long-distance gantlet of air or sea. Every constituent traveling to Juneau when government is in session has to pay dearly in time or money just to get there. In some ways, a government in Juneau is like a government in exile.

With so much oil and federal money, and such an impossible setting for a state capital, one would think that it would have been moved long ago.

This is where Wasilla comes in. Moving the state capital to a more accessible city has been discussed since statehood in 1959. Those in favor of the idea worked out what seemed like a fail-proof plan. In 1974, a majority of state residents (then, including me), a whopping total of 46,659 souls, passed a "move the capital" initiative. It authorized a search committee to nominate three sites at least 30 miles from the nearest city.

Two years later in 1976, they picked the Wasilla area (technically Willow) as the winner, a railroad siding and roadside service area 45 miles north of Anchorage. Starry-eyed real estate speculators began buying up land and creating house lots. But something very interesting and very Alaskan soon happened.

In 1978, after having agreed in separate initiatives to the move and to the site, state residents refused to cough up the billion dollars needed. That total amount was less than a 40th of the state's present Permanent Fund, most of which is "black gold." In 1982, they put the matter to rest for good, repealing previous attempts.
But for a small fraction of the money Alaska has in the bank, the history of Wasilla would have turned out very differently, and the present governor would probably not have been the governor or the republican vice presidential candidate.

Alaska is isolated enough. Wasilla was selected because it was isolated from the nearest city. Land prices were low. Houses were quickly built on bargain-basement lots. Trailer homes were dragged to many others.

Expectations were crushed, leaving a sense of disappointment, even anger. High school sports would substitute for political excitement. Pentecostal and Bible-banging congregations would offer succor, becoming a dominant influence in an isolated town in an isolated state with libertarian leanings and an isolated state capital.

This is the kind of geography that scares me, in spite of Wasilla's stunning natural beauty and vibrant, outgoing personality.