

Robert D. Kaplan. 2012. *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us about Coming Conflicts and the Battle against Fate*. New York: Random House, pp. 448.

How important is location for a country's security? According to Robert D. Kaplan, the map shows that location is a major factor in the potential strengths and weaknesses of every state. Having been a writer and thinker of foreign affairs and defense for over thirty years, Kaplan uses his own intellectual journey to tell the story of the power of maps and the fates of nations. Kaplan has been and continues to be a supporter of American involvement overseas. While he does not extol a viewpoint that America is the indispensable nation or that the United States should rule as a benevolent empire, Kaplan believes that the U.S. should have influence in every region of the world. While he wants the United States to stay in the game of shaping hearts and minds around the world, Kaplan would prefer America's leaders to view the world from a more realist perspective, as opposed to some of the idealistic aspirations that have drawn us into costly and counterproductive military adventures.

Kaplan echoes the concerns of human geography in noting that mountains, rivers, plains, deltas, and deserts are real, and can exert a profound impact on the kinds of politics and regimes that emerge; ideas cannot jump over mountains, cross deserts, or navigate oceans; as earlier students of Southeast Asia have observed, "Civilizations cannot climb." (cited in James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*). Early on in the text, Kaplan shares with the readers that he supported the military efforts to enable regime change in Iraq. His remorse from the

tragic outcome of this war he supported serves as a motivation for writing this book. Kaplan blames the idealist policymakers in the Bush White House for the failures of the Iraq war. These idealists were so caught up with an enticing message of a Western democracy in an Arab state that they never honestly anticipated the challenges of the Iraqi desert and the demands this physical environment had on a military. The toll this desert war wrought was not what the idealists expected.

Kaplan gives us a rundown of the exacting cost from the Iraq war: five-thousand dead and thirty-thousand injured Americans; estimates of Iraqi dead in the hundreds of thousands; and expenses running to the trillions of dollars. What benefit has been achieved from this cost? Kaplan concludes the cost was too excessive in Iraq for any type of moral achievement. Kaplan does not address the prospect that the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq may on balance have inflicted greater damage to Iraq and the region than maintaining the policy of containment of Saddam Hussein's regime. Nevertheless, as Shia Muslims are now in control of the largest country in the Middle East region, terrorist bombings still occur frequently, and religious minorities are persecuted in greater numbers, such a change in status is arguable. Perhaps Kaplan, as an influential foreign policy writer and Iraqi war supporter, is too personally culpable to fully determine how extensive the failures in Iraq may be. However, what Kaplan writes about the Iraqi war policymakers should be damning enough to their reputations for decades: the planners for the war did not take into account the physical terrain of the country in which they would fight. The degree of demand on the transportation and maintenance of the logistics of war is predicated on the physical setting. Idealist policymakers too enthralled with their mission may overlook such essential factors.

Kaplan writes that the Iraqi war planners were so preoccupied with the righteousness of their cause that they dismissed the history, the culture, and the physical environment of Iraq as mere backdrops to the mission, not actual obstacles. In principle, good intentions become the factor to

smooth out all rough edges of a foreign policy. At least that is the way Hans J. Morgenthau, a realist political scientist who is featured prominently in the text, views idealist policy makers. To Morgenthau, it is best to take aim for “the lesser evil rather than of the absolute good.” With this approach it explains why Morgenthau was an early critic of the idealist war on Communism in Vietnam. He opposed the war even before ground troops were committed in 1965. Kaplan suggests that Morgenthau, who died in 1980, would have much to criticize regarding the Iraqi war planners. To Morgenthau and other realists, individuals can value justice and democracy above all else, but the state must value order and survival. With those differences in mind, Kaplan charges that even the critics of the Iraq war remain idealists because we Americans do not want to accept realism. If, as realism purports, survival of the state is paramount, then the rights of individuals can be diminished. Certainly, according to realists, since not all states are as equally important for the survival of any one other state, then not all rights for all individuals can be defended. While this may be too much realism for most Americans to take in, Kaplan argues that it is time to confront our future in an increasingly competitive world. In a world with increased power centers, fighting wars over ideas becomes a luxury the United States cannot afford.

Many of these centers of power are merely regaining the positions of influence they have once had. A map speaks a universal language. With some knowledge of demographics, the locations of countries, regions, and continents indicate where power is increasingly housed. South America and Africa will always be on the periphery. Southwest Asia will always be a transition zone. China and India are returning to their traditional centers of power. Currently China and India make up one-third of the world’s population while Europe, the United States, and Canada make up only one-tenth. With that demographic reality, it is not surprising, as Kaplan writes, that military strategists of China and India are returning to the writings of 19th century American Navy Captain Alfred T. Mahan, who noted that world dominance had been based on control of the seas and would continue to be so.

Maps indicate that China and India are naturally the dominant powers in East and South Asia, respectively. But to have complete control and hence protection of their realms, those countries must have the ability to project power onto the high seas, especially in bodies of water near their borders. They must make these bodies of water, as Kaplan suggests, their own Caribbean. While utilizing the work done by geostrategist Nicholas J. Spykman in the 1940s, Kaplan posits that a country cannot become a world power until it gains control of its adjacent seas. From a geostrategic perspective, there is no room for moral judgment on the growth and spreading influence of a country. The growing naval power of India and China may leave Americans discomfited, but it is a natural progression as these two countries seek greater security.

It is evident that world powers want to control their adjacent sea lanes. Reading Kaplan affords the reader insight into Russia's increasingly aggressive actions toward Ukraine, and Putin's decision to forcefully annex Crimea, the home of Russia's Black Sea Fleet. One also finds an explanation to the intrusive Chinese activities in the East and South China Seas. As for the United States, one is left with a better comprehension of its ongoing belligerent treatment of Cuba, and its involvement in the internal affairs of Haiti, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, and any country within or near the Caribbean region. For Kaplan, geography does not provide an explanation for whether or not these powers should try to control the smaller states in adjacent waters; geography simply provides a predictive framework suggesting that hegemonic powers will seek to control smaller and weaker states within their sphere of influence, with little regard for the niceties of territorial integrity.

The limitation of ideas is revealed on the map as countries must consider how much they should or can interfere with the desire for geographic security. Kaplan concludes that the United States cannot defend Taiwan, a small island state one-hundred miles off the Southeast coast of China. Its location makes Taiwan an immediate interest for

China. Even if the United States has pledged to defend Taiwan, Kaplan reminds us again of how much American treasure and prestige were sapped in Iraq and Afghanistan, making the country ill-equipped and unmotivated to take on conflicts that are on the periphery of American interests. Two years after the publication of this book, we witness the limitation of threats by the United States to Russian aggression in Ukraine and Crimea. With military involvement off the table, Russia seems to do what is in its best interest geographically without concern that its actions harm the sovereignty and human rights of the people in the area. Thus, we are left with the critical question, “What good is an idea if there is no physical ability to enforce it?”

Kaplan ends his book with a chapter on the future of the United States. He writes that our country should not preoccupy itself with the actions taking place beyond its Pacific and Atlantic coasts, but instead should be most concerned with the activities beyond its southern border. Kaplan notes that the United States and Mexico have a greater Gross Domestic Product gap than any other two bordering countries. The way the U.S. treats its neighbor to the South will be predictive of its future behavior as the world’s global hegemon. Kaplan writes, “There is nothing healthier for America than to prepare the world for its own obsolescence.” The power is slipping from the hands of America, the question then follows: Are we wise enough to let it go and share the stage with other powers?

Geography presents stubborn facts as theorists pontificate on how to make the world a better place. Geography reinforces that equality among countries cannot be achieved because countries cannot have equal locations. Some states do matter more than others. Kaplan writes how Mahan’s identification of the four pivotal states of 1900, China, Afghanistan, Iran, and Turkey, still remains pivotal because of their locations on the Eurasian landmass.

For the people of the United States who like to believe that we are nation built on the individualistic ideas outlined in the constitution,

Kaplan's geographical determinism may seem dampening to the human spirit. But if one considers survival the most elementary factor of the human spirit, then this book is an essential guide for this country and the world. Kaplan's important book challenges us that the ideas of America must survive, but these ideas survive only if the state survives. The collective idea of America and the American state can survive and actually thrive if we recognize that other states have power and influence due to their historical locations. America can still have a bright future, only if it will use a map.

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