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SundayReview | OPINION

Why Trump Can't Disengage America From the World

By ROBERT D. KAPLAN JAN. 6, 2017

Debates about the extent to which the United States should use its power to lead and shape events in the world, and when and how it should intervene, are eternal in our history. In 1821, John Quincy Adams admonished us not to go abroad "in search of monsters to destroy." But in a world more interconnected than anything he could have imagined, we have been forced or tempted on occasion to do just that: in the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria or perhaps soon in North Korea. So what is the proper balance, given that Donald J. Trump's threatened disengagement from the world is an extreme position that violates the trajectory of our history? Ironically, the one factor that best informs us in this debate is never discussed: America's own geography.

Everyone knows that the United States is a virtual island-nation, protected by two oceans, with the sparsely inhabited Canadian Arctic to the north. But that is only the beginning of the discussion, in which America's physical location and topographical characteristics help provide a spiritual direction for our foreign policy — something that Mr. Trump cannot change.

The United States, occupying as it does the temperate zone of North America, is the most consequential "satellite" of the Afro-Eurasian "World-Island," wrote

the British geographer Halford J. Mackinder in 1919. Not only was America physically isolated from the threats and complexities of the Old World, and not only is it abundantly rich in natural resources from minerals to hydrocarbons, but America claims more miles of navigable inland waterways than much of the rest of the world combined. And this river system is not laid over the sparsely inhabited and thinly soiled Great Plains and Rocky Mountains, but over America's arable cradle itself: the nutrient-rich soil of the Midwest, thus unifying the centers of population in the 19th century, and perennially allowing for the movement of goods and produce in the interior continent. This river system, like the veining of a leaf, flows into the Mississippi, which, in turn, disperses into the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean, thus connecting farms and cities throughout the densely habitable part of the United States with the global sea lines of communication.

So while physically protected from the Old World, the United States has never really been isolated from it. The critical importance of the Greater Caribbean to the Mississippi River system made it necessary for America to strategically dominate what might be called the American Mediterranean — for such is the geopolitical centrality of the Greater Caribbean to the entire Western Hemisphere. This process of domination began roughly with the Monroe Doctrine and was completed with the building of the Panama Canal. Having become the dominant hemispheric power, the United States was then in a position to help determine the balance of power in the other hemisphere — and that is what the history of the 20th century was all about. Fighting two world wars and the Cold War was about not letting any power or alliance of powers dominate the Old World to the extent that the United States dominated the New World.

But before controlling the Caribbean, Americans first had to settle a continent. The barrier to that was the Great Plains, or the Great American Desert, as it was called in the 19th century. For the well-watered Midwest with its rich farmland was but an extension of the East. Yet the Great American Desert was dry, achingly flat in large measure and water-starved compared with the Midwest. While the riverine eastern half of the continent was friendly to individualism, the western half required communalism, to properly apportion scarce water resources. Indeed, whereas Iowa is basically 100 percent arable, Utah with its cindery bleakness is only 3 percent arable. The Great Plains and the Rocky Mountain West constituted

the real discontinuities in American history, since they fundamentally altered Anglo-Saxon culture and created a distinctly American one.

This American culture was only in small measure that of the cowboy tradition, with its lonesome risk-taking. In much larger measure it was about supreme caution, the respecting of limits, and thinking tragically in order to avoid tragedy: that was the only psychology and strategy able to deal with a stupefyingly hostile and parched landscape. The very settlement of the American West taught pioneers, despite all their conquests, that they could not always have their way in the world. And that is precisely the message advanced by the three greatest interpreters of westward expansion: Walter Prescott Webb, Bernard DeVoto and Wallace Stegner, all writing their most significant works in the middle decades of the 20th century, when the settlement of the West was much closer in time than it is now.

Another thing: The United States required the resources of an entire continent to defeat German and Japanese fascism, and later Soviet Communism. Without Manifest Destiny, there could have been no victory in World War II. But because settling that continent involved slavery and genocide against the indigenous inhabitants, American history is morally unresolvable. Thus, the only way to ultimately overcome our sins is to do good in the world. But doing good must be tempered by always thinking about what can go wrong in the process. These are all, deep down, the lessons of the interaction between Americans and their landscape.

Technology now increasingly defeats distance, but geography does not disappear: It merely becomes more claustrophobic on a crowded, contested and interactive earth. The continued movement of Latin history north into the United States from Mexico and Central America — something a wall will not stop — is only the most obvious geographic and demographic face of America's intensified involvement with the outer world. And because geography is more compressed, isolationism, which was a serious argument at a time when crossing the Atlantic took five days by ocean liner, is an absurdity in a world of cybercommunications. Still, there is this dramatic pull of an interior continent — so vast, and with so many problems inside it — that the world beyond can seem not quite real.

So a militant interventionism, which ignores the pressing needs of the continental interior — as well as ignoring the pioneers' respect for limits — is just as absurd as isolationism. But isolationism violates America's need to project power — a need that begins with our river system's meeting the Greater Caribbean. The American landscape itself, full of possibilities in some places and barely habitable in others, should make us humble, and therefore is an argument in favor of a measured, realist internationalism.

Realism is not isolationism. Because we are only a satellite of Eurasia, our allies are far away from us and situated on the rimlands of that supercontinent close to the great autocratic powers of Russia and China. Defending such allies allows us to prevent anyone in the Old World from attaining the same position of dominance that we have had in the New World.

We do this for a moral purpose, since only if we project power can our values follow along with it. Yet we must always remember that to invade is to govern: Once you conquer a territory, you assume responsibility for running it. That, too, is a caution deeply embedded in the experience of the western-bound pioneers, who knew the dangers of a difficult geography. The frontier was about being frugal with our assets. It was about pushing out over the perimeter, but only while tending to our own. It was about maintaining supply lines, however much that slowed us up. Above all it was about pragmatism. Such were the wages of settling a parched continent on the far side of the Missouri River — America's first adventure in nation-building in a hostile physical environment. And the further removed we become from the psychology of that original experience, the worse will be our encounter with the world beyond.

Indeed, our geography fiercely argues for a balance: be wary of nation-building, but remember the global responsibilities of a maritime nation. After all, it was only by conquering a great desert that we became a sea power — since without reaching the Pacific Coast we never could have built our 300-ship Navy. And it is that Navy, our primary strategic instrument given that nuclear weapons must never be used, that guards the great sea lines of communication along with access to hydrocarbons for our allies, thus allowing for a semblance of global order in the first place. America, precisely because of its geography, is fated to lead.

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A version of this op-ed appears in print on January 8, 2017, on Page SR4 of the New York edition with the headline: Geography Explains It All.

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