

Kaplan's "Revenge of Geography": The Southwest as America's Critical Frontier

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Regular readers of the History Notebook know how I frequently praise the American Southwest as a dynamic and invigorating place in which to live, a region that is geographically beautiful, socially transient, and artistically inspiring.

There are, of course, other sides of life in the Southwest, and it takes only a short ride across the international boundary that stretches from Brownsville to Big Bend National Park, El Paso, Nogales, and San Diego to see the ugly southern underbelly of the enchanting borderland; south of the border is where exists a third-world economy and drug trafficking reflecting the hunger and danger that lurks only a few miles from luxurious homes in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and Southern California.

This past weekend I read a book by a historian who is aware of the ugly side of the Southwest and is also aware of how important America's southern frontier is to the country today and how it will grow even more important for the nation in decades to come.

The author of the book is Robert Kaplan who from 2009 to 2011 served under Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and who since 2008 has been a senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security in Washington.

The book is titled "The Revenge of Geography," with the long subtitle "What The Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts And The Battle Against Fate."

Here is Kaplan's thesis taken from a few sentences in the opening chapter of his book:

"You do not have to be a geographical determinist to realize that geography is vitally important. The more we remain preoccupied with current events, the more that individuals and their choices matter; but the more we look out over the span of the centuries, the more that geography plays a role."

Kaplan writes that in the long haul geography is supremely important in history and that in times such as what we are experiencing now in the Middle East and around the world, "the only thing enduring is a people's position on the map. Thus, in times of upheaval maps rise in importance. With the political ground shifting rapidly under one's feet, the map, though not determinative, is the beginning of discerning a historical logic about what might come next."

He concludes his introduction by writing, "As political upheavals accumulate and the world becomes seemingly more unmanageable, with incessant questions as to how the United States and its allies should respond, geography offers a way to make some sense of it all."

So what does Kaplan have say about the future American Southwest and the Southwest's place in American history?

It is his belief "that America faces three primary geopolitical dilemmas: a chaotic Eurasian heartland in the Middle East, a rising and assertive Chinese superpower, and a state in deep trouble in Mexico."

He goes on to write that "while the United States was deeply focused on Afghanistan and other parts of the Greater Middle East, a massive state failure was developing right on

America's southern border, with far more profound implications for the near and distant future of America, its society, and American power than anything occurring half a world away."

And he writes, "Why not fix Mexico instead? How we might have prospered had we put all that money, expertise, and innovation that went into Iraq and Afghanistan into Mexico."

Kaplan asks, what might happen to the Southwest in the future? He believes that the study of history and geography tells us that in another fifty years or so the region of northern Mexico and the southwestern United States will in some way be joined together, and the final "destiny of the United States will be north-south, rather than the east-west, sea-to-shining-sea of continental and patriotic myth."

Most of us living in the Southwest today would probably think that Kaplan's idea is radical and far-fetched even with his many historical examples of similar national relationships over the last 2500 years.

It is difficult for me to imagine the society surrounding my homes in New Mexico and Texas being different from what they are now, but I do know the land that is now those two states was a part of Mexico until the Texas war for independence in 1836 and the US-Mexican War of 1846 that ended with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo which established the current southern border of New Mexico, Arizona, and California. Compared to geologic time, those events one hundred and sixty or seventy years in the past are not very long ago.

Kaplan sites one historian at the University of New Mexico, Professor Charles Truxillo, who believes northern Mexico and the

Southwestern states will separate from the two countries and form a separate nation.

That notion seems even more far-fetched than some of Kaplan's ideas, but both thoughts come from the same belief that knowing geography is essential in knowing what will happen to a community or a country.

When I think of the history of Lea County, I think of the land on which Lea's narratives were set. First, Lea is part of the Llano Estacado, a once impenetrable and feared land that is North America's largest mesa. Second, Lea's western boundary is a prominent escarpment, the caprock, that was an imposing obstacle for those traveling east or west. Third, Lea is also sand hills and playa lakes, both figuring prominently in the lives of Native Americans and early immigrants to the region. Finally, just below Lea's surface are geographic formations containing gas and oil that have radically altered the economic and cultural lives of the people living here.

The "revenge" of Kaplan's title resonates because we humans tend to think that we have control over our destinies no matter what the geography of our land, as if our modern communication and travel technologies negate the importance of travel. And most of us think, Kaplan writes, that we can control the narratives of our nation.

Kaplan believes that in many ways geography can have its way with us, and if we understand that idea, we will have a much better opportunity to avoid the mistakes that other major nations made in their nosedives from prominence, power, and influence.

I'd like to think that five, ten, or twenty generations from now, those living in Southeast

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New Mexico and the Southwest could still be enjoying the bountiful and invigorating place that we inhabit in 2012.



behind her, the dog Missy hunts on a rocky knoll filled with mesquite trees. And with houses in the background, a harvester moves slowly across a field of rosemary near Humble City.

These three photographs show a little of the diversity in the geography of the semiarid and desert Southwest and the various uses of that land. The mountains are the 7900-foot Chisos in Big Bend National Park. With a ranch windmill