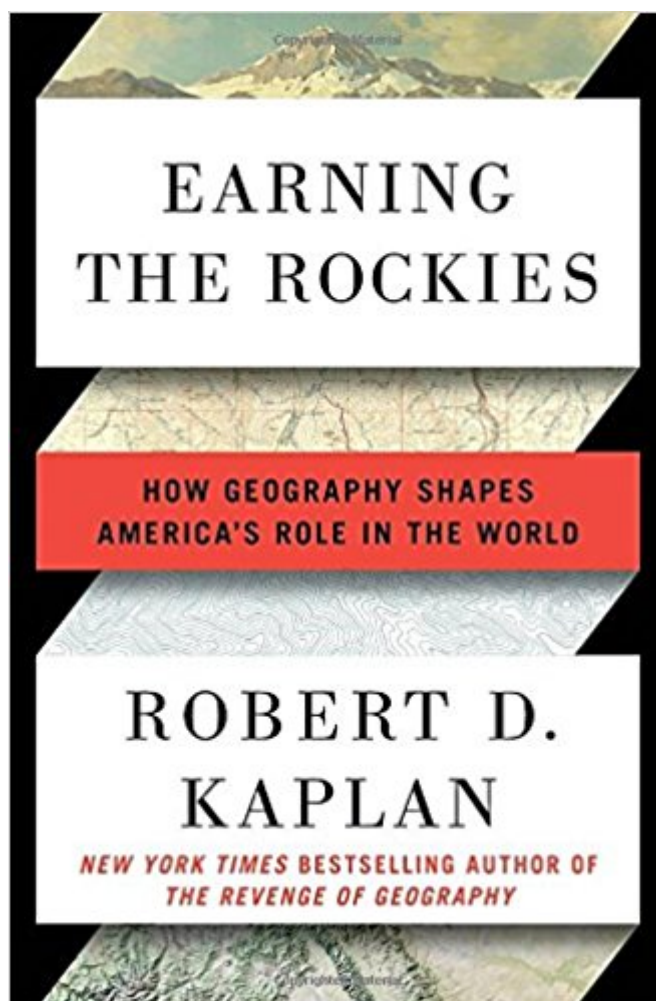


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# Earning The Rockies: How Geography Shapes America's Role In The World



## Synopsis

An incisive portrait of the American landscape that shows how geography continues to determine America's role in the world—from the bestselling author of *The Revenge of Geography* and *Balkan Ghosts*. As a boy, Robert D. Kaplan listened to his truck-driver father tell evocative stories about traveling across America in his youth, travels in which he learned to understand the country literally from the ground up. There was a specific phrase from Kaplan's childhood that captured this perspective: A westward traveler must "earn the Rockies by driving—not flying—across the flat Midwest and Great Plains. In *Earning the Rockies*, Kaplan undertakes his own cross-country journey to recapture an appreciation of American geography often lost in the jet age. Traveling west, in the same direction as the pioneers, Kaplan traverses a rich and varied landscape that remains the primary source of American power. Along the way, he witnesses both prosperity and decline—increasingly cosmopolitan cities that thrive on globalization, impoverished towns denuded by the loss of manufacturing—and paints a bracingly clear picture of America today. The history of westward expansion is examined here in a new light—as a story not just of genocide and individualism, but also of communalism and a respect for the limits of a water-starved terrain, a frontier experience that bent our national character toward pragmatism. Kaplan shows how the great midcentury works of geography and geopolitics by Bernard DeVoto, Walter Prescott Webb, and Wallace Stegner are more relevant today than ever before. Concluding his journey at Naval Base San Diego, Kaplan looks out across the Pacific Ocean to the next frontier: China, India, and the emerging nations of Asia. And in the final chapter, he provides a gripping description of an anarchic world and explains why America's foreign policy response ought to be rooted in its own geographical situation. In this short, intense meditation on the American landscape, Robert D. Kaplan reminds us of an overlooked source of American strength: the fact that we are a nation, empire, and continent all at once. *Earning the Rockies* is an urgent reminder of how a nation's geography still foreshadows its future, and how we must reexamine our own landscape in order to confront the challenges that lie before us. Praise for *Earning the Rockies*: "There is more insight here into the Age of Trump than in bushels of political-horse-race journalism. . . . *Earning the Rockies* is a tonic, because it brings fundamentals back into view."—*The New York Times Book Review* (Editors' Choice) "A sui generis writer . . . America's East Coast establishment has only one Robert Kaplan, someone as fluently knowledgeable about the Balkans, Iraq, Central Asia and West Africa as he is about Ohio and Wyoming."—*Financial Times* "Kaplan has pursued

stories in places as remote as Yemen and Outer Mongolia. In *Earning the Rockies*, he visits a place almost as remote to many Americans: these United States. . . . The author's point is a good one: America is formed, in part, by a geographic setting that is both sanctuary and watchtower. •The Wall Street Journal• "A brilliant reminder of the impact of America's geography on its strategy. . . . Kaplan's latest contribution should be required reading. •Henry A. Kissinger• "Unflinchingly honest, this refreshing approach shows how ideas from outside Washington, D.C., will balance America's idealism and pragmatism in dealing with a changed world. •Secretary of Defense James Mattis

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"There is more insight here into the Age of Trump than in bushels of political-horse-race journalism. . . . *Earning the Rockies* is a tonic, because it brings fundamentals back into view. •The New York Times Book Review (Editors' Choice)• "A sui generis writer . . . America's East Coast establishment has only one Robert Kaplan, someone as fluently knowledgeable about the Balkans, Iraq, Central Asia and West Africa as he is about Ohio and Wyoming. •Financial Times• "In his long career as a foreign correspondent, Robert Kaplan has pursued stories in places as remote as Yemen and Outer Mongolia. In *Earning the Rockies*, he visits a place almost as remote to many Americans: these United States. . . . The author's point is a good one: America is formed, in part, by a

geographic setting that is both sanctuary and watchtower. •The Wall Street Journal

“A text both evocative and provocative for readers who like to think

In his final sections, Kaplan discusses in scholarly but accessible detail the significant role that America has played and must play in this shuddering world.

•Kirkus Reviews

“Earning the Rockies is a brilliant reminder of the impact of America’s geography on its strategy. An essential complement to his previous work on the subject of geostrategy, Kaplan’s latest contribution should be required reading.

•Henry A. Kissinger

“Robert D. Kaplan uses America’s unique geography and frontier experience to provide a lens-changing vision of America’s role in the world, one that will capture your imagination. Unflinchingly honest, this refreshing approach shows how ideas from outside Washington, D.C., will balance America’s idealism and pragmatism in dealing with a changed world. A jewel of a book, Earning the Rockies lights the path ahead.

•Secretary of Defense James Mattis

“Earning the Rockies is a thoughtful, engrossing, eloquent reflection on the United States’ westward expansion to fill our continent and on the implications of the resulting national character for the current debate about the proper role of America in the world. Here’s another masterpiece by Robert D. Kaplan.

•General (Ret.) David Petraeus

“Robert D. Kaplan has given us a great gift in this intelligent, engaging, and memorable book about America at home and abroad. Jefferson believed our national fate inextricably linked to the West; Kaplan shows us how true that remains all these years distant.

•Jon Meacham, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House

“Any Robert D. Kaplan road trip is bound to be compelling, but Earning the Rockies is all the more so for crossing America. Like Kerouac and Tocqueville, Kaplan makes us see the country in a wholly new way. This concise classic is highly recommended.

•John Lewis Gaddis, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of George F. Kennan: An American Life

“What a fine, stimulating, energizing, and thoroughly original book . . . All diplomats and soldiers—indeed, all Americans with power or the hope of power—should read Robert D. Kaplan generally, and this slim volume particularly.

•Simon Winchester, New York Times bestselling author of Pacific: The Ocean of the Future

Robert D. Kaplan is the bestselling author of seventeen books on foreign affairs and travel translated into many languages, including Earning the Rockies, In Europe’s Shadow,

Asia's Cauldron, The Revenge of Geography, Monsoon, The Coming Anarchy, and Balkan Ghosts. He is a senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security and a senior advisor at Eurasia Group. For three decades his work has appeared in The Atlantic. He held the national security chair at the United States Naval Academy and was a member of the Pentagon's Defense Policy Board. Foreign Policy magazine twice named him one of the world's Top 100 Global Thinkers.

There are memoirs of road trips that are guaranteed to stand the test of time; Francis Parkman's 'The Oregon Trail', John Steinbeck's 'Travels with Charley', Jack Kerouac's 'On the Road', and Ernesto Guevara's 'The Motorcycle Diaries' to name just a few. Robert D. Kaplan's latest book describing his journey through the heartland of the United States in 2015 just as the primary season for the recent election was getting under way is probably not one of those. But in its own way, *Earning the Rockies: American Ground and the Fate of Empire* is just as important a book. Kaplan took his trip during a defining moment in American history and through keen observations provided invaluable insights into the story behind the most mindboggling political upset in American history. Kaplan, inspired by his father's tales of travel and the books of Harper's columnist Bernard DeVoto (Don't worry. I hadn't heard of him before either.), set out to find America by retracing a journey he took as a young man in 1970. This time, he sought to gain an understanding of how geography shapes America and makes us Americans who we are. In doing so, he linked his journey westward with that of America's journey west over the centuries. Although *Manifest Destiny* and *American Exceptionalism* are terms often heard in conjunction with discussions about imperialism, Kaplan holds that the rigors of westward migration and the land itself forged and molded those who challenged the frontier and continue to shape and define them today. Kaplan's journey began in the spring of 2015, just as the Republican primary with its vast herd of presidential wannabes was getting started. His strategy included spending a good deal of time in restaurants and coffee shops, just listening to the conversations that swirled around him. His logic was that while people may adopt a pose when speaking with strangers in general and journalists in particular, they speak most openly when in the company of friends and family in a non-threatening environment. One thing that surprised him was that although the televisions were constantly blaring political and international news, these were seldom the topic of

conversations. Talk was more likely to be about work, family, health and sheer economic survival. What was happening on the TV was just noise to them. The real drama was playing out right there in the room with them. As Kaplan pointed out, "Frontiers test ideologies like nothing else. There is no time for the theoretical. Idealized concepts have rarely taken firm root in America. People here are too busy making money — an extension of the frontier ethos, with its emphasis on practical initiative. Perhaps even more than what he heard, Kaplan was deeply affected by what he saw as he crossed the country. Many cities and towns were dying. In cities like Wheeling, West Virginia, and even Springfield, the capitol of Illinois, one was more likely to encounter empty streets and boarded up shops than indications of a healthy economy. Cities that once housed a vibrant middle class now have only a struggling working class that is teetering on the brink of poverty. Automation and globalization have gutted the mining and manufacturing industries that many communities relied on for their economic existence. Kaplan also attributed this decline to what he called the growth of flashy and sprawling city-states, often anchored to great universities such as Chicago, Austin, or Raleigh-Durham with its Research Triangle. These urban centers offered jobs and opportunities for young people and stripped places like Wheeling of any chance that an ambitious future generation will stay and turn things around. "I will not see very much of the middle class in my journey at all. This thing that the politicians love to talk about has already slipped from our grasp. I will encounter elegant people in designer restaurants and many, many others whose appearance indicates they have in some important ways just given up — even as they are everywhere unfailingly polite and have not, contrary to their appearance and my first impressions of them, lost their self-respect. The populist impulses apparent in the presidential campaign following my journey in early 2015 obviously emanate from the instability of their economic situation, suggesting the anger that resides just beneath the surface of their politeness." And this, more than anything else, is the crux of the issue when it comes to Donald Trump. Per Kaplan, "Trump represents a sort of antipolitics: a primal scream against the political elite for not connecting with people on the ground, and for insufficiently improving their lives. People trapped in their own worries as life becomes ever more complex, are simply alienated. And that alienation is registered in a taste for populist politicians." "What is the value of preaching diversity to a community that has none, or trade deals to a town whose local market has closed because it couldn't compete with a Wal-Mart thirty miles away? Much of the world that these people yearn for is gone and they know it isn't coming back. But still if a politician comes to their town and says "I'm here you, and I am with

you, don't you think that they will be tempted to believe in him, even if deep down they know better? For better or worse, the genie of globalism is out of the bottle. While there are many benefits to a global economy, there are also areas of concern. "The weakness of global culture is that, having psychologically disconnected itself from any specific homeland, it has no terrain to defend or to fight for, and therefore no anchoring beliefs beyond the latest fashion or media craze. And so we unravel into the world. And the more disconnected we become from our territorial roots, the greater the danger of artificially restructuring American in more severe and ideological form, so that we risk radicalization at home. "Bottom line: Of all the books and articles that I have read recently in hopes of gaining an understanding of what the hell happened in November, this comes closest to giving me an answer. No, we are not a nation of racist misogynists. What we are is a nation of people who once in a while would like to believe that the powers that be are listening to us. If we believe that all politicians lie, then why not vote for the one whose lies tell us what we want to hear? Perhaps, as the saying goes, you really can fool all of the people some of the time." Quotations are cited from an advanced reading copy and may not be the same as appears in the final published edition. The review was based on an advanced reading copy obtained at no cost from the publisher in exchange for an unbiased review. While this does take any statements out of my review, it otherwise has no impact on the content of my review. FYI: On a 5-point scale I assign stars based on my assessment of what the book needs in the way of improvements: \*5 Stars - Nothing at all. If it ain't broke, don't fix it. \*4 Stars - It could stand for a few tweaks here and there but it's pretty good as it is. \*3 Stars - A solid C grade. Some serious rewriting would be needed in order for this book to be considered great or memorable. \*2 Stars - This book needs a lot of work. A good start would be to change the plot, the character development, the writing style and the ending. \*1 Star - The only thing that would improve this book is a good bonfire.

Kaplan is a masterful and engaging writer, and is an effective apologist for many of the embarrassing wrongs of our past nation. He probably goes, however, beyond what the most of us would consider a justification for latter-day manifest destiny. Yes, as a nation, we need to look-out from a defensive position for what we need to do internationally to defend ourselves from foreign threats, and that sometimes requires that we take the lead in some international relationships. But, Kaplan goes well beyond that need.

My husband is re-reading this book a second time. In fact, he bought a hard copy so he could use yellow highlighter. I am now reading it; an interesting perspective on why we are so politicized geographically. Highly recommend.

One of the most important books I have read in years. It has helped me ground my political ideas more precisely and to avoid the liberal cliches to which I am prone.

I love geography and am not so interested in his family. Black and white on my Kindle didn't help either.

Extremely thought provoking book that made me rethink the making of America, the role of the geography in defining our character and our position and importance on the global stage.

A wonderful book for readers and students of Geopolitics.

A wonderful book - very interesting and entertaining.

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