



OPINION: TRUMP THE EXPANSIONIST KNOWS REAL ESTATE MATTERS - RICH LOWRY

Posted on January 11, 2025 by Rich Lowry



In business, Donald Trump was a real-estate guy. In the presidency, he might be one, too.

The prospective foreign policy of his second term has taken an unexpected turn, with his recent talk of annexing Canada, buying Greenland and taking back the Panama Canal. Rather than the neo-isolationist that he's often accused of being, Trump is talking like a neo-imperialist, at least in our own hemisphere.

Even if a President Trump does none of these things -- he's largely joking about the Great White North -- his musings are a reminder of the crucial importance of geography and the control of territory.

The first thing you need to do to understand the world, and to a large extent the behavior of nations, is to look at a map.

"Geography is the most fundamental factor in the foreign policy of states because it is the most permanent," the 20th century strategist Nicholas Spykman observed. "Ministers come and go, even dictators die, but mountain ranges stand unperturbed."

The world was never "flat," in the formulation of New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman that became the catchphrase of a complacent globalism.

No, the world is full of mountains and steppes; rivers and coastlines; temperate, tropical and dry zones. Some nations, by virtue of their location, are secure, others vulnerable; some naturally rich, others resource-starved.

The first thing you need to know about Britain, for instance, is that it is an island, "this precious stone set in the silver sea," as Shakespeare had it. This basic, ineluctable fact has crucially shaped Britain's strategic orientation and its national character. It is why it became a naval power committed to global trade, and why it considered far-flung places -- courtesy of the waves -- relatively nearby.

The English Channel has been an indispensable buffer between it and continental Europe. There's a reason Nazi Germany invaded Poland, France, the Soviet Union, Denmark, Norway, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Greece, Yugoslavia and Italy -- but not Britain.

As for Germany, Robert Kaplan writes in his illuminating book "The Revenge of Geography" it "faces both east and west with no mountain ranges to protect it, providing it with pathologies from militarism to nascent pacifism, so as to cope with its dangerous location."

The United States is uniquely blessed by its geography. It is of immeasurable importance that we are both a continental and island nation,

combining the massive resources that come with the former, with the protection from hostile European and Asian powers that comes with the latter. We have abundant natural resources, ample coastlines, a massive river system and a disproportionate share of the world's best soil, among other advantages.



That we ended up stretching from sea to shining sea wasn't an accident. Our forefathers supported continental expansion as a matter of geopolitics, whether it was the Louisiana Purchase or the Mexican-American War. They believed that it would make us stronger and more secure, and -- although their methods weren't always admirable -- they were correct.

Control of territory matters, sometimes even relatively small pieces of territory. Consider Hawaii. It is of enormous consequence that the island archipelago sits in the middle of the Pacific athwart key sea lanes. Other powers circled it in the 19th century, while the great naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan urged us to acquire it. We all know the role of Pearl Harbor in World War II, and as the "Crossroads of the Pacific," Hawaii remains a major economic and military asset.

As for Greenland, the idea of buying it from Denmark is no more ridiculous than any other land purchase we've ever made, including of the U.S. Virgin Islands in 1917 ... from Denmark.

Greenland has attracted the interest of such estimable American statesmen as Harry Truman and William Seward. Given its strategic location in the Arctic Circle and its wealth of mineral deposits, it's an alluring proposition.

Geography isn't everything, but often when it comes to geopolitics, there's no substitute for cold, hard real estate.

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