

# Briefly Noted

*The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate*, Robert D. Kaplan (New York: Random House, 2012), 432 pp., \$28 cloth.

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“Suddenly,” observes Robert D. Kaplan, “we were in a world in which the dismantling of a man-made boundary in Germany had led to the assumption that all human divisions were surmountable” (p. 3). Following the triumph of the West in the cold war, many, including Kaplan, believed that human agency and its various constructs—including human rights, free markets, democracy, science and technology, and even humanitarian intervention—would emerge as the single most important force in shaping world events and would lead to freedom and prosperity across the globe. But the years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, Kaplan says, have revealed a much darker reality: while many societies have indeed become more democratic and prosperous, this often occurred on the heels of bloody civil wars and periods of mass murder, among other atrocities. The horror of the Rwandan genocide offers a case in point. Where did our understanding go wrong?

As *The Revenge of Geography* explains, we ignored the “realist dictum . . . that the legacies of geography, history, and culture

. . . set limits on what can be accomplished in any given place” (p. 23). This lesson, of course, is familiar from the “illusion-free insights” of Thucydides, and perhaps most notably from the work of Hans Morgenthau, who in *Politics Among Nations* cautions that “to improve the world” we must understand and “work with the forces [of human nature], not against them” (p. 24, quoted by Kaplan). Drawing on this insight, *The Revenge of Geography* conveys a similar message: while human agency certainly matters for shaping the course of world events, it operates from within certain constraints, which above all else are dictated by geography.

Kaplan explores the insights and perspectives of “geographers and geopolitical thinkers of an earlier era” (p. xxii), among whom were Sir Halford J. Mackinder, who argued that the fate of great empires rests on control of the Eurasian “Heartland”; Nicholas J. Spykman, who contended that the “Rimland,” not the Heartland, held the key to world power; and Alfred Thayer Mahan, who

maintained that maritime power projected across the Indian and Pacific oceans constitutes the fulcrum on which geopolitical fate rests. Drawing upon his extensive travels to appraise and augment the work of these and other thinkers, Kaplan weaves together a rich tapestry of insights to examine the ways in which the contours of the map will shape the geopolitical

futures of the European Union, Russia, China, India, Iran, and the United States.

The take away from *The Revenge of Geography* is best summed up as follows: “Even if we can send satellites into the outer solar system—and even as financial markets and cyberspace know no boundaries—the Hindu Kush still constitutes a formidable barrier” (p. xxii).