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## Book Review

Prisoners of Geography  
Ten Maps That Explain Everything About the World

by Tim Marshall, Scribner, \$26, 290 pp.

### Does the world map explain the world tensions?

by Colin Woodard

Study the globe and ask yourself why the countries are shaped the way they are, why some repeatedly seek to change their shapes and why others are riven by fault lines that threaten to shatter their peace or their very existence.

Tim Marshall, a veteran foreign correspondent for Britain's Sky News, argues that the answers lie in the study of geopolitics — that is, how geographic factors shape international politics. The physical realities of landscape, climate, demographics and resources “are too often disregarded in both writing about history and in contemporary reporting of world affairs,” he writes in his book, “Prisoners of Geography.” “Geography has always been a prison of sorts — one that defines what a nation is or can be, and one from which our world leaders have often struggled to break free.”

To better explain these geopolitical realities, Marshall leads readers on a tour of much of the planet, exposing them to history, geography and current events in a couple dozen countries on five continents. Those who make the journey will probably see their Trivial Pursuit performances improve but will not come away with a fruitful new way of seeing the world. This is because Marshall's account is all over the map, and case studies suffer from significant oversights.

We're told that geographical factors often explain the distribution of and relationships between nation-states: The Himalayas have kept China and India apart, the interlocking rivers of western and central Europe have kept those countries connected, the lack of navigable waterways and the presence of dense jungles have kept sub-Saharan Africans separate from one another and the outside world. Yet we're also shown that Americans managed to settle, conquer, integrate and defend a nation spanning the Appalachians, the Mississippi River Valley and the Rocky

Mountains despite the presence of significant imperial competitors; that Korea, despite cultural, historical and geophysical unity, is starkly divided into hostile states that have been technically at war for seven decades; and that the ethnographic settlement of east-central Europe defied geographical logic, making for a messy map and an even messier 20th-century history. Geography, it seems, is a rather low-security prison.

A chapter on the United States is organized around the idea that any nation that managed to control the American landscape would be geopolitically destined for superpower greatness, which does little to explain how this actually came to pass. What are we to make of the fact that Americans of the early republic profoundly disagreed on the wisdom of enlarging the nascent federation? New Englanders vehemently opposed the Louisiana Purchase precisely because it would thwart the gradual, orderly spread of their socio-cultural model and enhance the relative power of their slaveholding Southern rivals and the “uncouth” Scots-Irish settlers of the Appalachian uplands. Western expansion happens to have made the United States great, but it very nearly destroyed it by provoking the Civil War, a defining conflict that Marshall manages to leave unmentioned. Why the United States didn’t annex Canada — with which it shares a long, geographically arbitrary border — goes unexplained. There’s a profoundly revealing geopolitical story to be told in North America, but it is not to be found here.

Japan, an island nation short on industrial resources, became a maritime power by necessity, and we’re shown how it used this capability to invade and annex great swaths of East and Southeast Asia in the 1930s and 1940s. Oddly, imperial Japan’s ambitious geopolitical strategy eastward into the Pacific is entirely ignored, including the *nanshin* — the “southward advance” toward the tropical South Pacific that had been on the national agenda since the 1880s. To counter European intrusion, Japan declared war on Germany in 1914 so as to annex its extensive possessions across Micronesia, which were then subjected to intensive colonization, development and militarization schemes. These islands — the Marianas, Marshalls and Carolines — were critical to Tokyo’s strategy to win the Pacific War and were captured by U.S. forces only after a staggering loss of life on both sides. The Pacific, the largest geographical feature on Earth, is an unfortunate piece to drop from an analysis of a maritime Pacific nation’s worldview.

Marshall is on much firmer ground when discussing Russia. He provides a convincing analysis of Russian geopolitical thinking, a result of living on a flat plain that, despite its enormous size, lacks unfettered, year-round access to the open ocean. For centuries, Russian leaders have sought to establish buffer zones from invasion — occupying Ukraine, Poland, Siberia and the Far East — and to follow Peter the Great’s advice to “approach as near as possible to Constantinople and India” so as to reach open seas. “It doesn’t matter if the ideology of those in control is czarist, Communist, or crony capitalist,” Marshall writes, “the ports still freeze and the North European plain is still flat.”

“Prisoners of Geography” also makes clear the terrible price the world has had to pay because European officials decided to create nation-states with borders that completely ignored cultural geography. Pashtuns were divided between southern Afghanistan and northwestern Pakistan, guaranteeing that neither state would be cohesive or stable. Iraq artificially bonded together Kurdish, Sunni Arab and Shia Arab lands, an invented nation that appears to have already ceased to exist. In Africa, “the giant black hole known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo . . .

should never have been put together,” Marshall notes, as it contains more than 200 ethnic groups and hundreds of languages spread over a largely forested region bigger than Germany, France and Spain combined; 6 million have died in a half-century of civil wars there.

He also rightly closes with the Arctic, a region where long-standing territorial disputes are literally unthawing. The United States, he notes, has unilaterally disarmed on both the logistical and diplomatic fronts, allowing its heavy icebreaker fleet to dwindle from six to one since 1960 and failing to ratify the U.N. Law of the Sea Treaty, “effectively ceding two hundred thousand square miles of undersea territory.” (Thus, we’ve surrendered both the oil and other resources that may be on the seafloor, and the means to patrol, explore and defend the Arctic territory that remains.) Marshall’s concluding hope is that humans can manage to ditch the prison of geography, “that technology . . . in our newly-globalized world can be used to give us an opportunity in the Arctic . . . and get the Great Game right for the benefit of all.”

*Colin Woodard is a journalist and the author of five books, including “American Nations: A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures of North America” and the forthcoming “American Character: A History of the Epic Struggle Between Individual Liberty and the Common Good.”*

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