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Astigmatism and Geopolitics

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ASTIGMATISM AND GEOPOLITICS

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In the sixth century, the good monk Cosmos made a map. It is a wonderful map: the earth, the center, surrounded by water, the sky above, and over all that room for the blessed. Cosmos drew it all in his cell, and he knew that what he drew was accurate — he had the Holy Scriptures as source material.

Now you and I and Monk Cosmos would have a certain amount in common. We would agree that there is land, and that there is water. You and I might, however, experience some difficulty in persuading the good monk that there is air, but we might. Beyond that, there would be grievous differences of opinion. But this is a normal state of affairs. Because maps when looked at become ideas.

Aside from measurements in knots and miles and cubic footage, or quantities of this or that, there is a serious question whether there is much else on the face of the globe about which we today agree unreservedly among ourselves. At the very least it would seem undeniable that the way in which we look at a map of our little planet suggests whole ranges of thinking altogether different from one another.

Spin a school boy's globe of the world. Viewed from the equator the blue of the sea becomes all-important, the land masses fade. The faster the globe is spun the more obvious becomes the fact that the world's surface is largely salt water.

The fact is suggestive. It serves as a reminder that in this day and age the island empires are in league together against the

great Eurasian land mass. It brings to mind the interdependence of the world's islands, and that this interdependence, being industrial as well as cultural, depends upon the traffic of the seas. It may also suggest that in the air age the outside lines of communications may have advantages over the inside ones because of the effect of aerial war on enemy roadnets. And this in turn may suggest that military mobility now depends on seapower quite as directly as it did in the pre-railroad age. From such considerations, and there is no denying the truth in them, certain strategic preferences flow logically enough; geography has dictated them.

But suppose, with the globe still spinning, the eye is shifted to the north polar projection. From this view, the world seems strangely static. Two great continents almost touch in this cold silent vastness. Distance seems to pervade and direct all relationships. One loses a sense of the importance of allies, and air technology — both offensive and defensive — dominates in terrifying singleness all other considerations. Given the destructive capability of modern weapons, taken together with their carriers, the polar projection would appear to be the twentieth century map. "A glance at the globe dispels the distortion of the Mercator projection maps," writes General Bonner Fellers, in his *Wings for Victory*. And he writes it with all the enthusiasm of a man with a great discovery. "From the Arctic mainland of North America to Russia's arctic shore is only 2,000 miles!" This is likewise true.

But the truth is also that men live on the land, and that they continue to exist thereon under conditions which each succeeding generation is equally sure can not endure. Indeed, the great mistakes in military history have to do with mis-estimates of human durability, resourcefulness, and courage. And this in turn suggests that the realistic way to look at the globe is to stop it and to examine the relationships of one piece of land on which people live to another on which they live also.

The point is simply this: Depending upon the angle of sight the meaning of geography changes, and its lessons appear to be different. The situation is much the same as once it was with six blind men each of whom, examining a single part of an elephant, ended his days with a set of convictions as to the nature of the beast quite at variance with those of his fellows.

If one's view of the globe determines the patterns of one's thinking, does it not stand to reason that one's thinking changes one's views of the breadth of the seas, the height of mountains, the real distance between one area or another? And, despite the bad name German pseudo-scholars gave it between the World Wars, "geopolitics" is a convenient name to give to the process by which mind modifies statistical geography. "Geopolitics" is, that is to say, the study of the relative strategic value of various pieces of global real estate with a view to clearer understanding of the direction of national policy. The platform of geopolitics is human judgment. Hence, geopolitical thinking may be brilliant and illuminating, or it may be as mad and distorted as the human mind can make it. The speed at which a ship can sail, the distance a plane can fly, the availability of road-building machinery, governmental stability, all change one's conception of the geopolitical significance of jungle and swamp, tundra, ice flows, and economic complexes.

Now a judgment of the impact of the atomic, the supersonic, and the principle of the Pogo plane on world geography is out of the question here. But if positive thinking is outside the limits of the possible, negative thinking is not necessarily so. And some negative thinking about geopolitics may be helpful as a preliminary to its opposite.

A word or two about the meaning of negative thinking as the term is used here. There are at least two ways of looking at war, as there are indeed at any subject. Those who lose wars study what went wrong. Those who win canonize the principles of their success and, parenthetically, it is rare that both aspects

receive comparable treatment within the hard covers of a single book — as they do, for example, in Professor-Admiral Samuel E. Morison's volumes on the Naval History of World War II. Because the United States has won its wars, perhaps an insufficient attention has been given to what goes wrong and why. The motive here is simply to point out some of the obstacles to clear thinking about the relationships between geographical areas in the light of their constantly changing value to national security.

Historically, the most frequent form of distortion occurs when geography is tailored to fit a political premise which has nothing to do with geography whatsoever. Take the case of Sir Halford Mackinder.

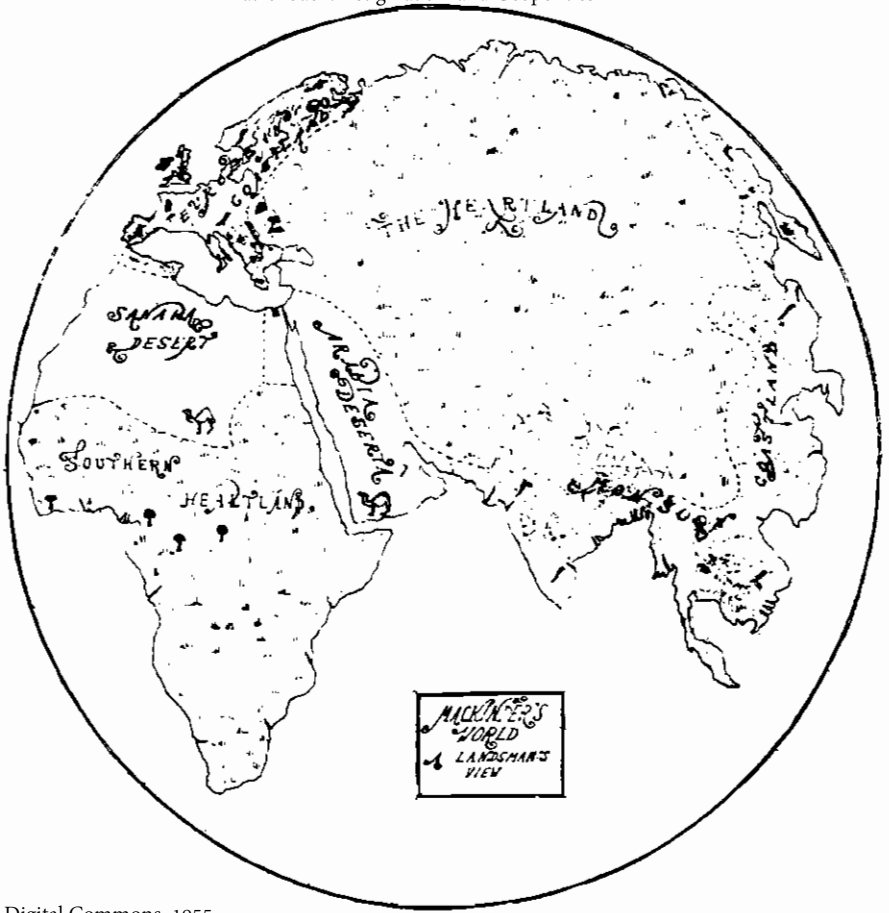
Sir Halford was in many respects a perceptive man. He had the imagination to understand that airpower had a role, and, in a world that had fallen quite madly in love with a misinterpretation of Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, he must be given credit for correcting a current impression that somehow navies had a life of their own quite independent of the land.

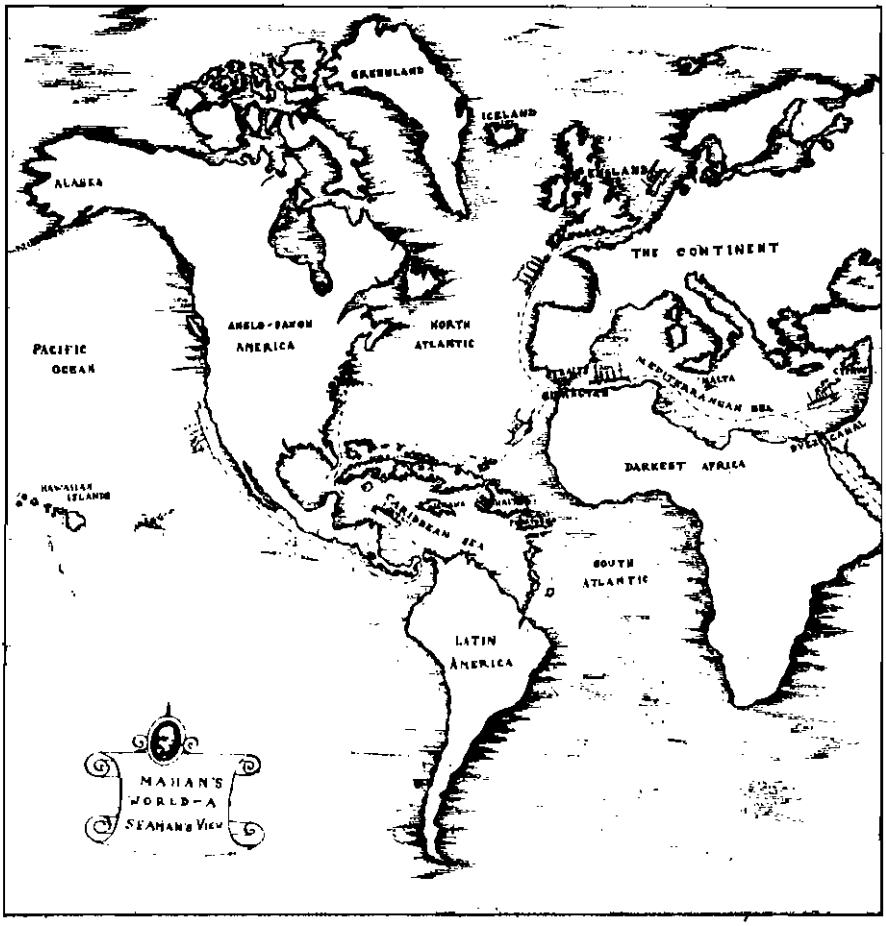
But Sir Halford was a man who, in 1919, was properly anti-German and proudly British. On the morning of victory in 1919, he created a marvelous phrase and with it a delightful world.

The phrase you will remember. It was written in 1919 in his *Democratic Ideals and Reality.* " When our statesmen are in conversation with the defeated enemy," he wrote, "some airy cherub should whisper to them from time to time this saying:

'Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland:
Who rules the Heartland commands the World Island:
Who rules the World Island commands the World.' "

It was a resounding phrase, and all those who wanted to be tough on the Germans for reasons more personal and vindictive, adopted the slogan as the scientific reason for being even


THE HEARTLAND
SAHARA DESERT
ARABIAN DESERT
SOUTHERN HEARTLAND
MACKINDER'S WORLD
LANDSMAN'S VIEW


GREENLAND
ICELAND
ALASKA
THE CONTINENT
PACIFIC OCEAN
ANGLO-SAXON AMERICA
NORTH ATLANTIC
MALTA
CYPRUS
DARKEST AFRICA
HAWAIIAN ISLANDS
CARIBBEAN SEA
SOUTH ATLANTIC
LATIN AMERICA
MAHAN'S WORLD—A SEAMAN'S VIEW

tougher. In the first world which Sir Halford created, the heartland was a great lump which, it must be confessed, was in actuality largely tundra. England was, so to speak, made the prime mover of power in the crescent around the heartland, and the United States was conveniently forgotten.

With the coming of World War II, Sir Halford redrew his world; or, to put it another way, during the two decades between the First and the Second World War he remade it. There were enormous differences between the first version and the second, the most notable of which was the U. S. A. had been brought in to help the British fulcrum readjust East Europe back into viable balance.

So much for Sir Halford. Despite his flashes of very real perceptiveness, he was a propagandist.

He was followed, of course, by the strange German General Karl Haushofer and a whole school of lesser men who laid down the scientific-geographic — "geopolitical," they called it — justification for Nazi expansion. They offered a doctrine of landpower pure and simple. They put "Mackinder in a straightjacket," as one commentator put it. At the same time a school of Japanese geopoliticians was, in as weird a gathering of pages as one could imagine, justifying Japanese imperialism on the grounds that Japan must control the Chinese heartland, for, as it was put in the perhaps spurious *Tanaka Memorial*, " . . . the full growth of national strength belongs to the country having extensive territory." Yet, in retrospect, were these policies of landpower, the iron laws of survival as they were thought to be, so different from those adopted by the Japanese and German navy men of the same and previous generations? The precepts which Mahan laid down, when put into practice by the Germans, brought on a world war. Japanese naval programs suited their geopolitical situation, but poorly. How much better off Japan would have been had she been the Norway of the Far East rather than the Great Britain!

If loose, enormously loose, geopolitical thought were not currently so much in evidence, perhaps Mackinder and Haushofer would not be remembering. But geography is still used in the daily press, in speeches and in private conversation, as scientific data in support of one policy or another arrived at from points of view which have little or nothing to do with geography at all. This tendency is particularly disastrous to straight thinking, it might be said parenthetically, in this age in which geography is fast becoming a forgotten subject of study.

We are beset by slogans, which I must hastily add may have something to them but, in the absence of any accompanying data, serve certainly no useful purpose. For example, there is the oft-quoted phrase of Sir Winston Churchill — "the soft under-belly of Europe." For what kind of troops is this rough and thorny hide on the under-belly of Europe really soft? Or was this phrase — so fanciful, so catching — simply used to illustrate the policy choice between the invasion of Europe or further "dabbling," as American contemporaries called it, in the Mediterranean, a choice on which the Prime Minister had strong and certain convictions?

Geographical cant is in constant use. In Southeast Asia, we have heard much of the so-called "Domino Theory" or "Chain Theory" as applied to North Vietnam. It has been contended that the geography of the region is such that if this area falls, Laos will, then Cambodia, then Thailand, and eventually Burma. It is a catchy notion, but the point would be a difficult one to prove. The future of Southeast Asia depends, as it has, on who will fight where, when, and with what. There may have been political reasons why this area should not have been given over to the Vietminh, and I most emphatically believe that there were, but there do not seem to have been important geographical ones — either from the point of view of food production, communication network, or terrain features.

Geography has been used to further what may, or may not, be valid political views elsewhere. Formosa has been declared

so important a salient that if lost U. S. defenses would be hurled back to the rocky shores of Oregon or to the beaches of California, the exact location of the new defense line being a matter of the speaker's choice . . . . The Tachens have been called the cork without which the Formosan bottle would sink into the sea . . . Korea is spoken of as the knife against the belly of Japan.

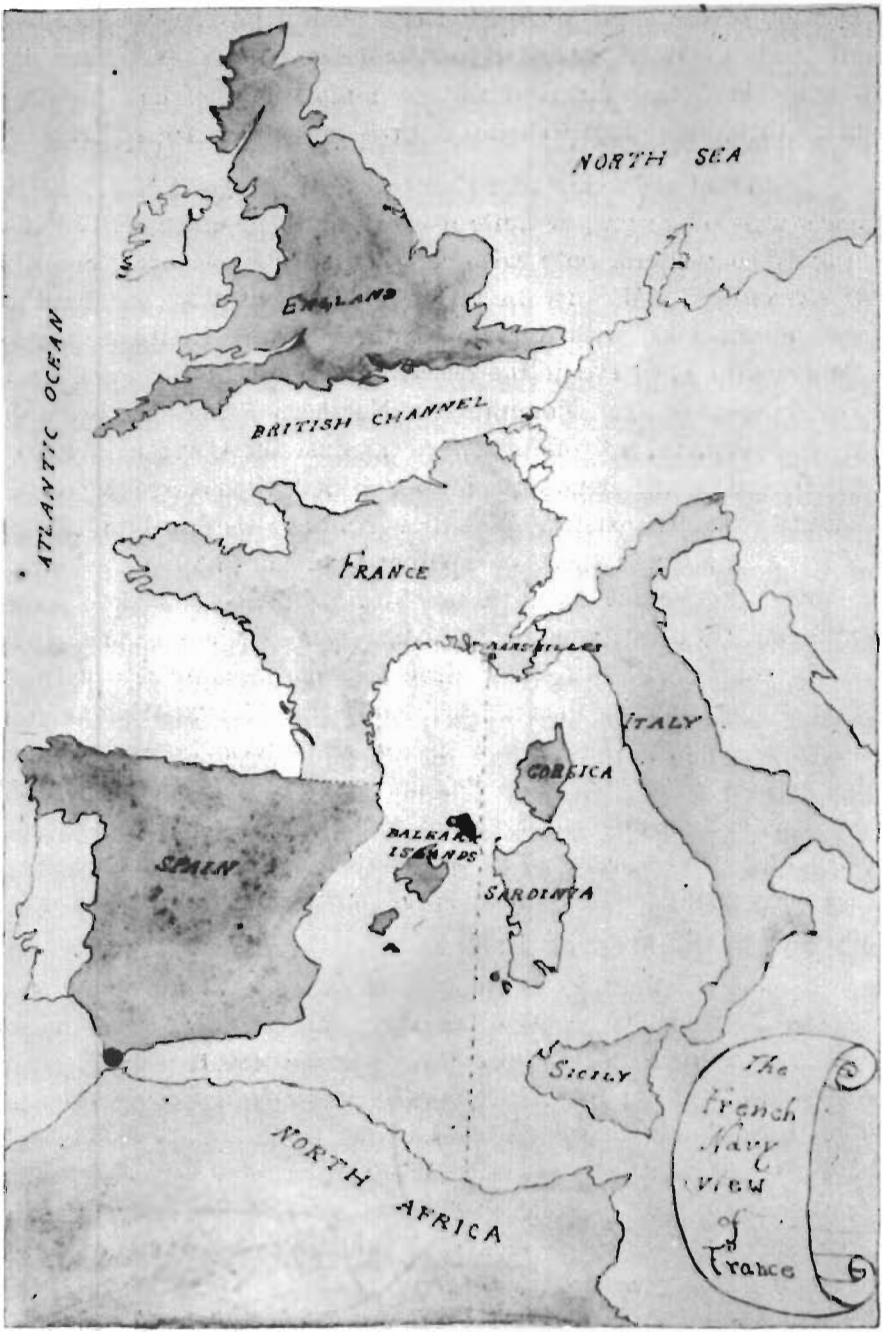
There may be truth in all such pronouncements, but glibly and unthoughtfully spoken they give an urgency to a course of action which it would not otherwise have. Nothing can be more dangerous to a military planner, for a military planner — being a citizen — has strong opinions, too, on what should be done from a political standpoint. Often in military history these opinions have colored his views of geopolitical reality.

Far more difficult to deal with are conflicting views on the importance of one weapon against another, or of one weapons system against another, and the changes these make in geography. Take an extreme case.

In the French Army, most officers made their reputations in the colonies between major European wars. But their hearts were always on the Rhine frontier. " . . . from its beginnings France has found herself under the absolute necessity to fight for her existence on the land side . . .", wrote General Weygand in the 1930's. "There has been no such necessity to battle the threat to seaward," he continued. He had no concept at all that a colonial power might be dependent on seapower.

The French Navy was at the same time suggesting that the Empire was in fact becoming more important than metropolitan France herself. And naval personnel were suggesting that it followed that the British were in fact the enemy, that their control of the French seacoast on the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, from Gibraltar and Malta, had in fact reduced the control of France over her own destinies. In other words, French Generals and French Admirals were drawing their maps of the world quite differently, both with the most absolute sincerity — and no

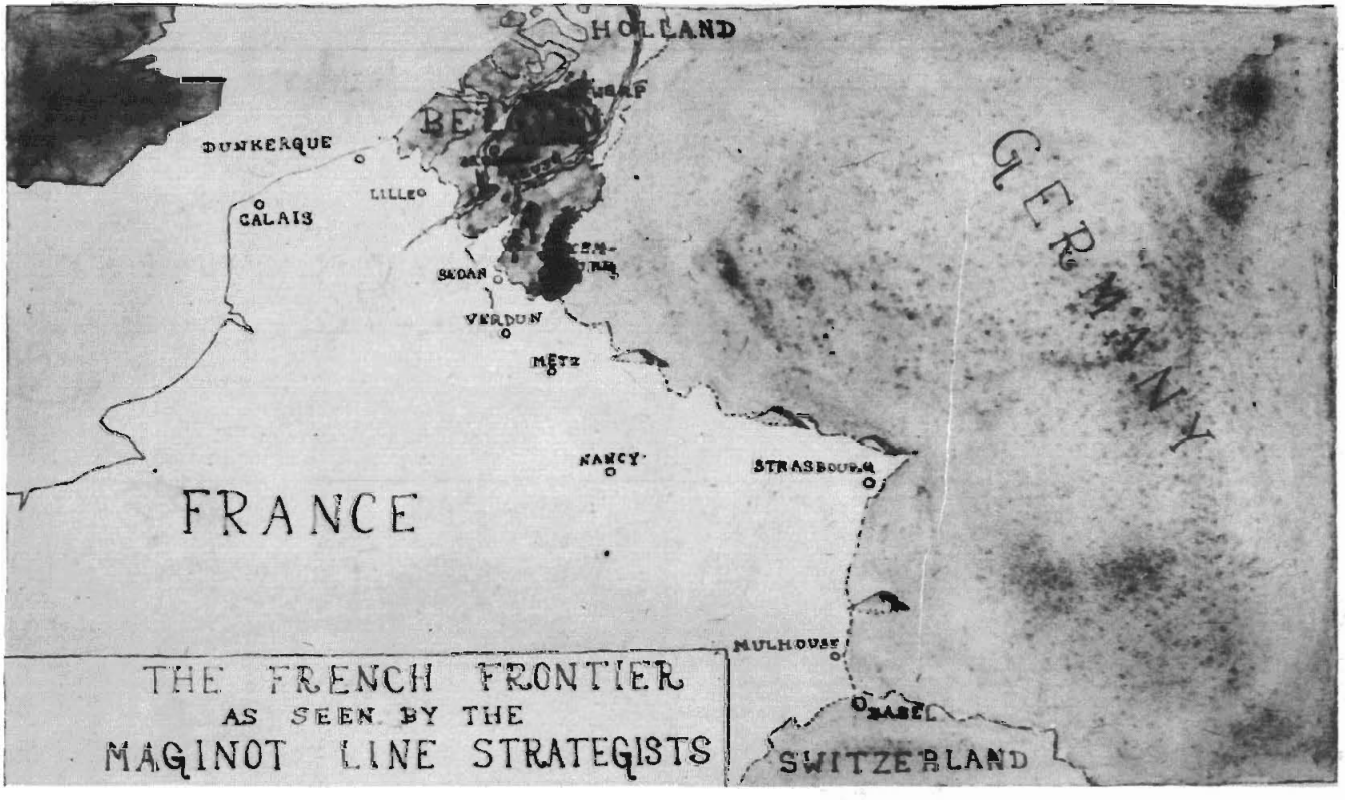

GERMANY
Paris
FRANCE
the
French Army
view
of France

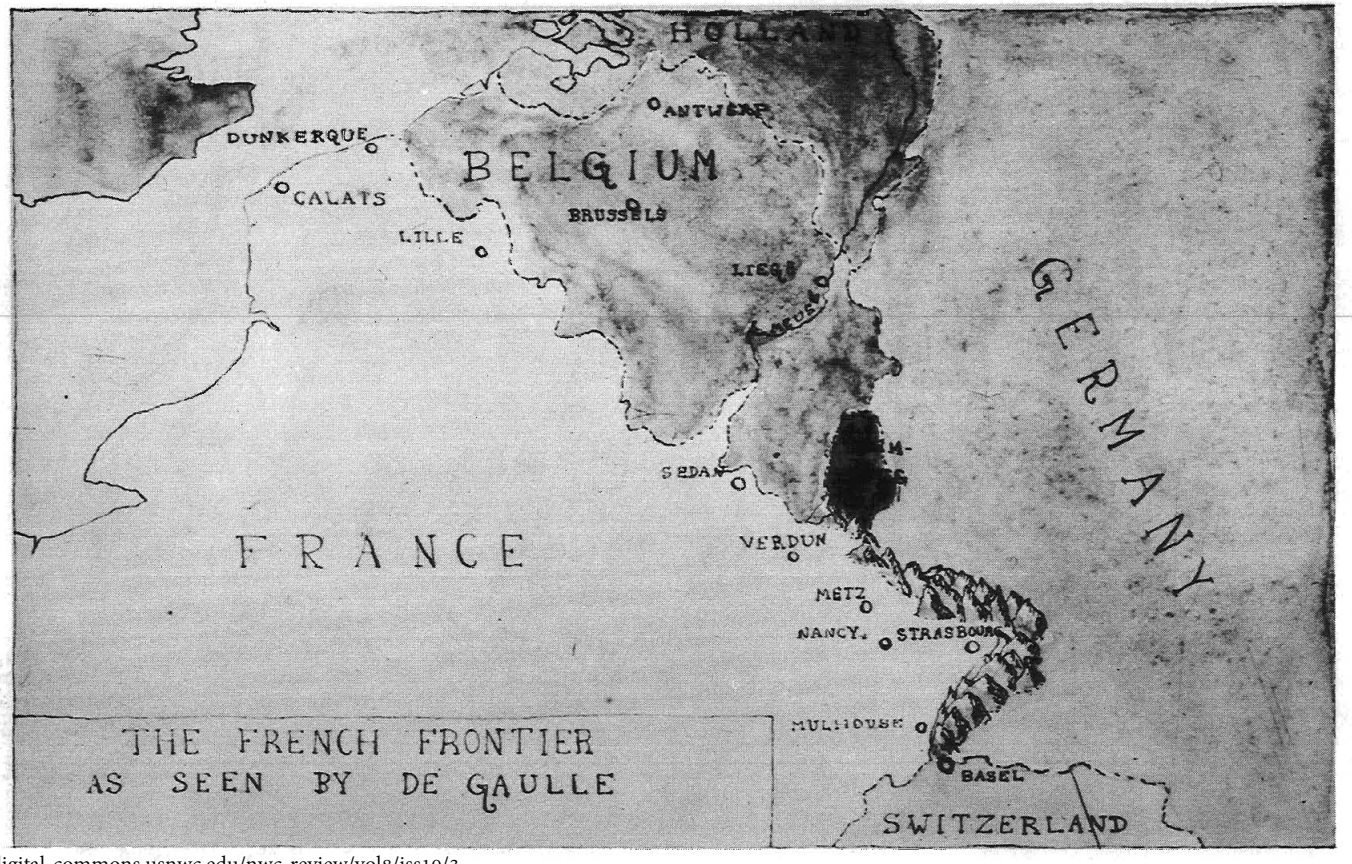

NORTH SEA
ENGLAND
ATLANTIC OCEAN
BRITISH CHANNEL
FRANCE
ITALY
CORSICA
SPAIN
BALEARIC ISLANDS
SARDINIA
SICILY
NORTH AFRICA
The French Navy View of France

meeting of the minds at all. Perhaps such a problem is insoluble, although an awareness of its existence, which I have never discovered in French Army literature, might of itself have led to a more thoughtful approach to the problems of French security.

Indeed one's view of a single weapon may, of course, change one's view of geography quite as radically. For example, two distinguished writers, both with long military experience, describe the frontiers of France in terms so different that one reading the descriptions with terrain features given fictitious names would never gather that the descriptions were of the same area. For one, the Vosges Mountains in Northern France were a substantial obstacle, a "wide rampart" against the German invasion; for the other, the same area presented 500 kilometers "where no natural obstacles existed." The first mentions the low-lying plains of Belgium, where there "is neither wall nor ditch upon which to base resistance," as an area "in which valleys, rivers, roads and railways seem eager to guide the enemy." The second ignores the Belgian plains altogether. How can one account for the disparity? The answer lies in their differing appreciation of the strategic value of the tank as an offensive weapon. He who believed the Vosges high, and Belgium flat and inviting, advocated a small elite mobile attack army. This was General de Gaulle. The other was General Debeney of the French General Staff, a man who believed in the primacy of defensive doctrine and, specifically, in the Maginot Line.

But if General Debeney shifted his thinking and the terrain to suit his conceptions of a weapon's usefulness, his thinking was no more stereotyped than was Hitler's. If the General was a victim of the mistaken notion that the defense was stronger than the offense in Europe, Hitler was no less a captive of the notion that what was effective in France would be as effective in the vast plains of Russia. The concept of space as related to technology has been an enormous stumbling block to a realist view of geography. Space, after all, must be defined as area enhanced by obstacles minus a communications network. The mis-


HOLLAND
DUNKERQUE
LILLE
CALAIS
SEDAN
VERDUN
METZ
NANCY
STRASBOURG
MULHOUSE
BASEL
GERMANY
FRANCE
SWITZERLAND
THE FRENCH FRONTIER
AS SEEN BY THE
MAGINOT LINE STRATEGISTS



THE FRENCH FRONTIER
AS SEEN BY DE GAULLE

take of the Japanese in China and of various of the French High Command in Indo-China was that neither appreciated the fact that mechanization and mobility are not interchangeable terms necessarily. Nor did they appreciate that strangulation and seizure of economic strong points, railroads and industrial facilities does not necessarily bring victory, that the old maxim about destroying force in being still holds.

Finally, as governments change course so the strategic usefulness of squares of sea and cubes of air change, too. Hence, there are no iron-bound laws in the would-be science of geopolitics. And the problem, therefore, is to have that degree of flexibility which allows judgment to change as the political scene changes. There is an analogy here between the international broker who invests and reinvests with revolutions, elections, agreements broken and made, and the military planner who must think in like terms about strategic investments.

Take the last few months, for example. We were able to deal with the situation in Korea, *as we did*, because of our base structure in Japan. What difference then has our withdrawal of forces from Japan made in the Far East? And is this situation not aggravated by the opposition to the Mutual Security Pact in the Philippines?

In the Near East the British have, for economy reasons, cut down their force commitment at the same time that the U. S. S. R. has decided to underwrite Egyptian armament. In the Mediterranean, too, the relations between Greece and Turkey have become strained in the matter of Cyprus, and there seems to have been a notable improvement in the relations between Jugoslavia and the U. S. S. R. The point is simple. From a military point of view, the geopolitics of the Mediterranean has so changed that it invites rethinking.

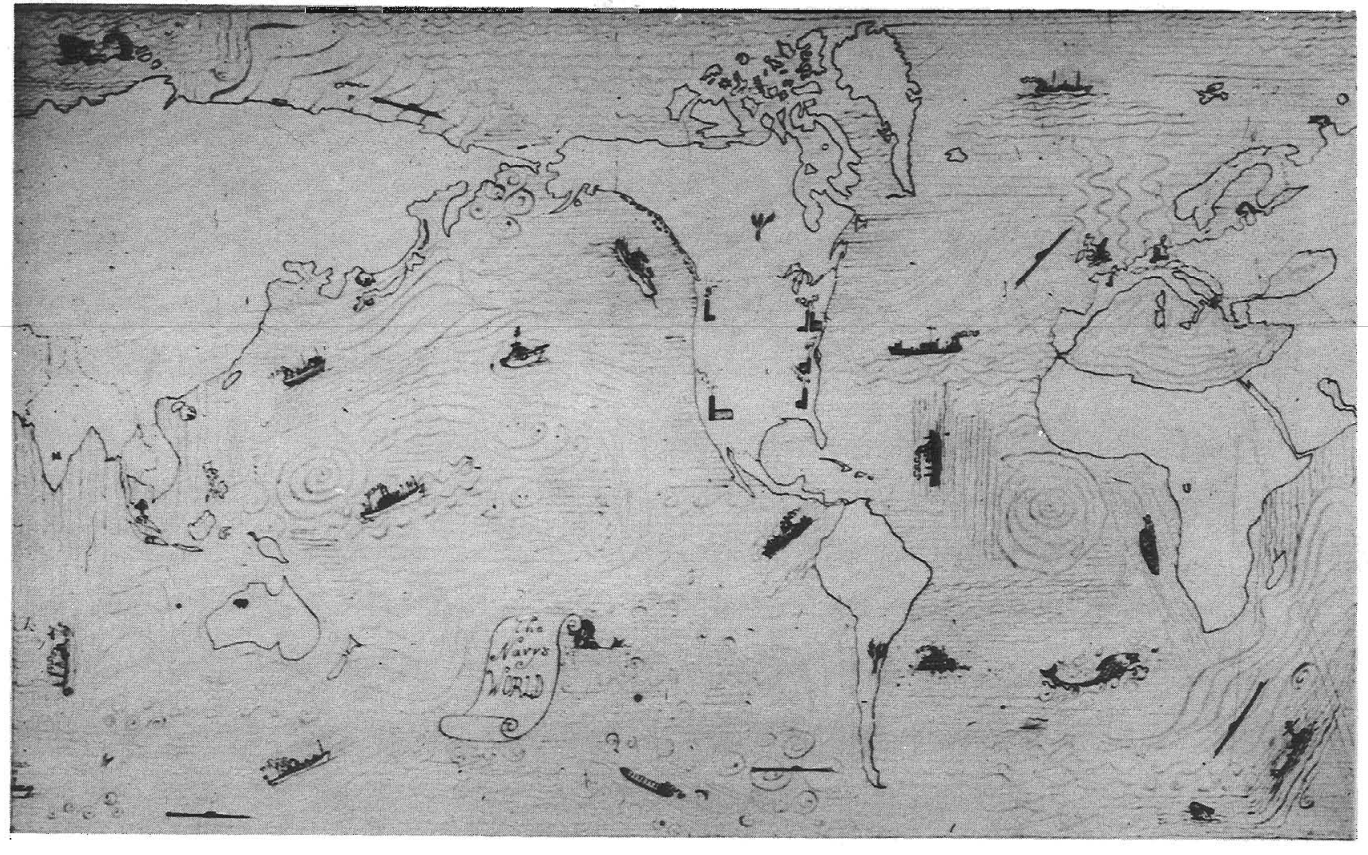
And, finally, in Europe there have been changes no less momentous and overall quite as alarming. Difficulties in North Africa have diverted French troops which had been available for

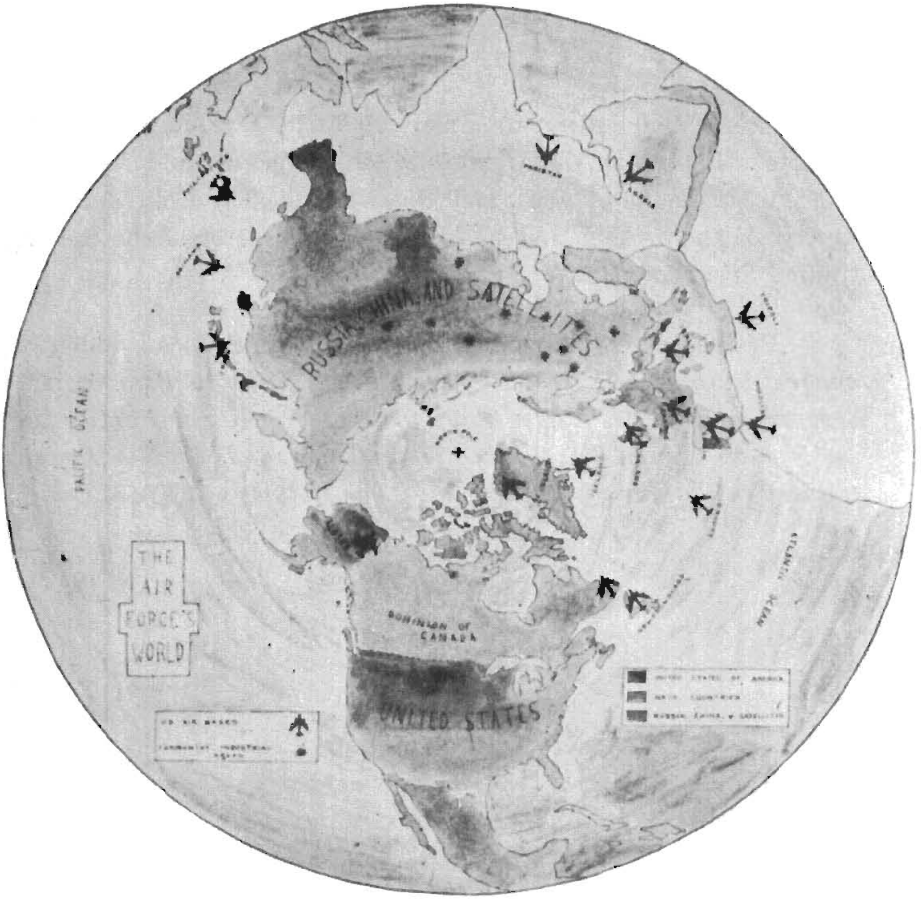
NATO. The Belgians have cut their time-in-service requirements. A recent British poll indicated the British were looking forward to further cuts in the defense budget. The withdrawal of U. S. troops from Austria, while these were never considered strategically vital, has nevertheless changed the communications network from Italy to Germany. In short, the relative value of European real estate from a strategic point of view has changed as greatly as has that in the Middle East or the Far East. What adjustments of forces in being, of plans and alternate plans do these changes call for?

Are these naval problems? Are the roles and missions of the Navy and Marine Corps such that problems of so global a nature come within their purview? I suggest that they most certainly do. For the Navy's mission is not just an attack mission; nor is it just a defense mission. Its mission is also one of supply so that any changes in the disposition of any kind of forces anywhere is a naval affair. As bases have been pushed further and further from the United States, the supply function of the Navy has increased. As bases are threatened by political change, naval transportation may be more important still. And in total war the sea may be the last mode of available transport for troops and supply, just as it was the first.

The problem of straight thinking, then, on geopolitics is a difficult, devious business at best. First, one must not confuse political desirability with military realism. Second, there is the problem of correctly evaluating the relationship of advancing technology to geography. Historically, this has been the most difficult problem of all. But, today, there may be a problem more difficult still: namely, the relationship of political change to the value of global real estate. Since the political situation changes from week to week and more drastically from month to month, it is no more than a truism to say that what was very well for yesterday may not be for tomorrow and may not even be for today; which is to say that sound, positive thinking must be preceded by a battery of negative thoughts.

THE
ARMY'S
WORLD


The Navys of the World


PACIFIC OCEAN
THE AIR FORCE'S WORLD
DOMINION OF CANADA
UNITED STATES

BIOGRAPHIC SKETCH

Professor Edward L. Katzenbach, Jr.

Professor Katzenbach attended Princeton University, receiving his B. A. degree in 1940 and M. A. degree in 1948. He was an Instructor in History from 1946 to 1950.

From 1950 until September, 1955, he was Assistant Professor of History at the University of Tennessee and associated with the Institute of War and Peace Studies at Columbia University. At the present time he is Associate Director of the Defense Studies Program, Harvard University.

Professor Katzenbach has written several books, including *Modern European History; French Army* 1870 *to Present; Far East from U. S. Military Point of View; Political Parties and the French Army Since the Liberation,* and *Economic Policies of the French Government of National Defense,* 1870-1871.