



Earning the Rockies: How Geography Shapes America's Role in the World

Robert D. Kaplan

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An incisive portrait of the American landscape that shows how geography continues to determine America's role in the world

Book Club Pick for Now Read This, from PBS NewsHour and The New York Times • “There is more insight here into the Age of Trump than in bushels of political-horse-race journalism.”—*The New York Times Book Review* (Editors’ Choice)

At a time when there is little consensus about who we are and what we should be doing with our power overseas, a return to the elemental truths of the American landscape is urgently needed. In *Earning the Rockies*, *New York Times* bestselling author Robert D. Kaplan undertakes a cross-country journey, traversing a rich and varied landscape that still remains the primary source of American power. Traveling west, in the same direction as the pioneers, Kaplan witnesses both prosperity and decline, and reexamines the history of westward expansion 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. Concluding at the edge of the Pacific Ocean with a gripping description of an anarchic world, *Earning the Rockies* shows how America’s foreign policy response ought to be rooted in its own geographical situation.

Praise for *Earning the Rockies*

“Unflinchingly honest . . . a lens-changing vision of America’s role in the world . . . a jewel of a book that lights the path ahead.”—**Secretary of Defense James Mattis**

“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**

“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: How Geography Shapes America's Role in the World Details

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From Reader Review Earning the Rockies: How Geography Shapes America's Role in the World for online ebook

Peter Tillman says

Geography is destiny, Kaplan argues persuasively in this fine, short book on topics he's been thinking about for a long time. He makes a good case for American exceptionalism, based on our long experience with settling and conquering our frontier territories. Geography brought the US great wealth, and hence great responsibilities. He argues for continued support of what's left of the Pax Americana, where that's practical. Avoiding (for the most part) West Africa and the Middle East. Better to concentrate our efforts on Asia and the Pacific. He argues that the US Navy maintains order on the high seas, permitting orderly commerce worldwide. "Do not ever take those ships for granted," he says.

I've been reading Robert Kaplan's stuff for years, mostly his long articles for the Atlantic (Monthly), and have generally admired his practical-minded approach to America's international affairs.

The New York Times published a long, worthwhile review recommending Kaplan's book:
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/24/book/review-of-earning-the-rockies-by-robert-kaplan.html>...

Lauren says

Based on the title, I didn't expect this book to be a travelogue. I was expecting more philosophy, more history. Instead, we got Kaplan recounting his roadtrip and making assumptions.

If Kaplan would have stuck to the theoretical approach, he could have avoided the book's two biggest pitfalls:

- The book was written during the Presidential Primaries of 2015 and 2016. This seems like ages ago now, and he makes many assumptions about the election that... didn't happen.
- Instead of actually *talking* to people in coal country, the plains, the mountains, and the west coast, he chooses to just creep on their conversations at various diners, cafes, and restaurants. This seemed really sloppy, and lead him to make even more assumptions based on a single conversation that he overhears at IHOP/Bob Evans/Waffle House/Denny's.

This book had the potential and capacity to be much more. Still, I took away some things from it, and I want to find some other books that get more to the heart of this subject.

3 stars

Crispin Burke says

Not good. The first two thirds of the book are part travelogue but also consist of Kaplan summarizing a bunch of books he read about Westward expansion. The last third is basically a rehash of old Kaplan works including The Revenge of Geography and lays out a worldview in which neoconservatism and liberal

interventionism overlap.

Cheryl says

America is a continent? The good folks of Mexico and Canada might have something to say about that. Pittsburgh is a masculine city? What about the wives, mothers, sisters? People who live in 'red' regions/states are fearful of the slim & pretty cosmopolitans of the urban coasts? :dropped jaw:

p. 57. I'm done. I've 'earned the Rockies' from both sides, several times, and don't need Kaplan's weird vision to elucidate what seems obvious to me.

To know a country, spend time in it, with the people of it, using intelligent sampling. Don't just fly from one coastal world-city to another. And don't just listen to conversations at rest areas and historic monuments, either.

I won't rate this, as I didn't finish it. But I think probably, tbh, 2 stars, because there do seem to be a few interesting tidbits.

gaudeo says

This is a unique book: a meditation on domestic geography that morphs into a commentary on international policy. I confess that it's the geography that interested me most, having grown up in the Great Plains, which figure so prominently in Kaplan's thinking. But his extrapolation from America's expansion westward to its quasi-imperialism on the world stage is quite thought-provoking, particularly given the present political climate. This is not a long book, but it requires thinking--always a good thing.

Adam says

In many ways 'Earning the Rockies' feels like a capstone for the arc of Robert Kaplan's work from the mid-nineties through today. It is more a collection of two essays than a book, but it is well worth reading.

The first essay follows Kaplan's journey across continental United States, framing its narrative with the history of America's westward expansion and the state of America's heartland today.

The second essay, far shorter than the first, focuses on the United State's role in the broader world. Drawing on themes established in the first essay, it defends Kaplan's description of the United States as an empire, his advocacy of realism, and limited American engagement with the rest of the world.

Kaplan's defence of realism, particularism over universalism, and what he describes as 'cruel objectivity' is the maturation and conclusion of controversial arguments that he started a long time ago. They are best appreciated as such. While its style is accessible enough, I would hesitate to recommend this book to anyone who isn't already familiar with at least some of Kaplan's previous work. I appreciated the themes 'Earning the Rockies' addresses more as the conclusion of a conversation started in Kaplan's earlier works (and continued by his numerous critics).

Chris says

An introspective and personal reflection on geography and American exceptionalism. Reminded me of a modern Tocqueville's "Democracy in America." Kaplan introduces us to his father, a bus driver, who took him on road trips through the East Coast. Now Kaplan is on the road in 2015 reflecting on America then and now. He introduces us to Bernard DeVoto, Wallace Stegner, and Walter Prescott Webb, among other chroniclers of American history and geography. Kaplan maintains that our unique geography and frontier experience mandates our role as a world power. He talks of the role of the individual and the role of community and how the Great American Desert militated individualism. It's deep thoughts and when he finally reaches San Diego in sight of the Navy's ships he embarks on more thoughts about our role in the world with a discussion of imperialism. Humanitarianism could be considered imperialism. Democracy and human rights have replaced Christianity as the new flag to rally around. It's thought provoking with its foreign policy observations as well as the personal experience and observations of being a fly on the wall in dying and prospering towns along the route.

Ray LaManna says

Kaplan emphasizes the importance of geography when talking about our nation's history as well as geopolitical issues... a very good and succinct discussion.

VreemderDanFictie says

“Wie wil weten hoe machtig een land is, moet beginnen met een analyse van de geografie”, aldus Robert D. Kaplan. Dat is ook precies wat de auteur beoogde met zijn boek De verovering van de Rockies. Het eindresultaat is een ge(s)laagde mix geworden: deels memoire, deels reisverhaal, deels geopolitiek pamflet.

Kaplan is niet de eerste de beste. De man is niet enkel bekend als journalist en bestsellerauteur, het is ook een befaamd politiek strateeg die al advies verleende aan het Pentagon en het Amerikaanse ministerie van Defensie. Kaplan is vlot van de tongriem gesneden en schuwt de controverse niet, maar als hij spreekt spitst menig politicus de oren.

De verovering van de Rockies begint in Kaplans jeugd. Aangevuurd door de verhalen van zijn vader, een vrachtwagenchauffeur die het hele land doorkruiste, besluit hij om hetzelfde te doen. Hij begint aan de westkust in Massachusetts en rijdt per auto naar Californië aan de oostkust. Hij houdt halt in wegkwijnende dorpen maar ook bij toeristische trekpleisters als Mount Rushmore.

Tijdens deze roadtrip wil hij de bijbelse proporties van het land opnieuw ontdekken en voelen wat er leeft onder de mensen. Maar bovenal wil hij met een beschrijving van het landschap uiteenzetten hoe de geografie van continentaal Amerika een allesbepalende factor is geweest in de lotsbestemming van de Verenigde Staten.

Kaplan betoogt dat de Amerikaanse expansie naar het Westen, over de Great Plains en voorbij de Rocky Mountains, een cruciale rol heeft gespeeld in de ontwikkeling van het Amerikaanse karakter. Om dat punt te

maken, gaat hij een boude stelling links of rechts niet uit de weg. Zo stelt hij onomwonden dat de eenzame, angstaanjagende vlakten een zekere mate van risicovol gedrag stimuleerden, volgens Kaplan nog steeds een fundamenteel kenmerk van de Amerikaanse persoonlijkheid.

Hoe dan ook, door de verovering van eindeloos uitgestrekte lappen grond kreeg in Amerikaanse geesten het idee vorm dat de Verenigde Staten een missie in de wereld hadden: het geloof in een Manifest Destiny. De unieke geografie van continentaal Amerika heeft er volgens Kaplan voor gezorgd dat de VS ongeziene macht konden verwerven. Een gunstige ligging, diepe havens, bosrijke en vruchtbare grond vol bodemschatte en een netwerk van bevaarbare binnenwateren hebben van de VS in sneltempo een economische en militaire wereldmacht gemaakt.

Dit alles bracht niet enkel een sterk nationaal bewustzijn met zich mee, maar ook een bepaalde verantwoordelijkheidszin. Volgens Kaplan zijn de VS het aan de rest van de wereld verschuldigd om het broze mondiale machtsevenwicht te bewaren. Met hun vloot bewaken ze de wereldzeeën en via NAVO houden ze de Russen uit Europa. Niet omdat ze dat zo graag willen, maar omdat hun natuurlijke dominantie hen daartoe veroordeeld heeft. Kaplan geeft toe dat de invasie van Irak een blunder was (hoewel hij er destijds zelf voorstander van was) maar betoogt dat Amerika niet anders kan dan een internationale militaire rol te blijven spelen.

De verovering van de Rockies is een interessant en onderhoudend boek. Het telt slechts een kleine 200 pagina's maar staat bol van de scherpe observaties. De stellingen van Kaplan zijn weliswaar onomwonden en af en toe besluip je het gevoel dat zijn beweringen niet altijd even onderbouwd zijn. Los daarvan: de auteur geeft je een hoogst originele kijk op de Verenigde Staten en de rol die het land speelt in de wereld. Kaplan is een vlotte verteller, al wordt zijn betoog nu en dan wat drammerig. Vooral het laatste hoofdstuk leest meer als een politiek pamflet en lijkt weggelopen uit een ander boek.

Lees de volledige recensie: [https://vreemderdanfictie.be/2017/06/...](https://vreemderdanfictie.be/2017/06/)

E says

This is a bit like two books under one cover. The first is a travelogue as Kaplan drives across the country. He sees the decaying northeast, the either vibrant or dying midwest (depending on if a university is nearby, or if tech industry is booming, or if large-scale agriculture is feasible), the spread-out great plains and Rockies, and the Pacific-facing west. Kaplan includes many interesting observations about this vast country, and his point is to show that America can't help but be a world leader. It is well-watered and -resourced, and obviously enjoys natural barriers (large oceans) from those who would do it harm.

The second half of the work discusses what to do about these built-in advantages. Here Kaplan looks to the need for American strength in places like the Middle and Far East. He does not advocate adventurism, but is clear about the good that the US and its 300-ship navy can do around the globe. This is very much a follow-up to Kaplan's previous work, and quite convincing. Kaplan believes in power for the sake of peace and growth, and knows that a little preemption now can save a lot of heartache later.

Larry Deaton says

Robert's Kaplan's EARNING THE ROCKIES: HOW GEOGRAPHY SHAPES AMERICAN'S ROLE IN THE WORLD is a work of geographical determinism. How could it be anything but that with a title like that.? But it's still a very good book, and I think it makes a successful argument for why geography has determined America's role in the world.

The book begins with an extended exploration of the works of the American historian, Bernard DeVoto. Kaplan revisits what he says is DeVoto's greatest work, THE YEAR OF DECISION:1846. He explains that DeVoto spends a lot of pages on Indians and Mormons before telling the story of how America drifted into a war with Mexico. But above all, DeVoto's book is a look at westward expansion and how geography and human ambition were intertwined in shaping that expansion. (I had an old copy of the DeVoto book. As a result of reading Kaplan's book, I bought copies of the other two books in his historical trilogy. They are ACROSS THE WIDE MISSOURI and THE COURSE OF EMPIRE.) He says this about these books. As great as they are, DeVoto's writings are forgotten today because the West is just there in those writings, devoid of theorizing. I think that makes sense.

Kaplan then starts the tale of his own recent westward journey across the United States. He begins at Sagamore Hill, Teddy Roosevelt's home on Long Island, and talks about how Roosevelt acquired greatness. It was mainly his Western experiences as a young man, but it didn't hurt that he read a new book every evening. It's not along way before he arrives at Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where James Buchanan's house is. Kaplan simply notes, "He was our worst President" (this book was written last year).

Before long, he is in Wheeling, WV, a city that "appear as if struck by a plague." He says that the town barely has a pulse. And then on into Ohio. He gets to Marietta, which is doing well. He explains that it's near natural gas fracking country., which provided industry and jobs and also says that it's the home of Marietta College, which is a strong liberal arts college. And then he's into Portsmouth, Ohio which feels even emptier than Wheeling, WV. In 1970, cities and towns like Wheeling and Portsmouth were alive.

But in Indiana, things come alive again. Especially in Bloomington, where 46,000 students attend Indiana University. IU, like the other American state universities, is where much of the scientific, technological, and engineering research and training is done.

At this point, he explains the political differences of what he has seen from before this book and as he was writing this book. He recommends the thoughts here of Walter Russell Mead and Meads's conclusion that the "the elites in Washington or New York are Wilsonians, Hamiltonians, or Jeffersonians. ... but the broad mass of Americans are Jacksonian." The latter is largely due to the Scots-Irish who came to America in the 18th and 19th centuries and helped originate the frontier culture." Americans largely do not want to know the details about foreign policy.

In this westward journey, Kaplan has brought along THE PORTABLE FAULKNER. But even more importantly, he has brought along Walter Prescott Webb's THE GREAT PLAINS, published in 1931. Webb focuses on the scarcity of water past the 100th median. The buffalo, which grazed on the short grass, was well suited for the Great Plains, and for human beings, the Great Plains encouraged self reliance and risk taking. He explains how this helped make America what it was after the frontier itself closed and led to a special kind of American Imperialism, including the conquest of the Philippines in 1899. A hundred years later, by 2000, the United States had 700 military bases in more than 130 countries.

So, what are Kaplan's own politics? It's sort of hard to say. He never really explains but I think he's a mild neo-con. He argues that the United States journey westward has continued in that we have become a Pacific nation and explains how the most important strategic weapons of the United States are the 11 carrier task

forces.

I do like what he says in his Epilogue, where he explains where alienation is coming from and how that makes people prone to demagogues. He explains how the U.S. urban areas are becoming global city-states. And finally he says that the answer to the [economic] devastation of Wheeling, West Virginia and Portsmouth, Ohio is not retrenchment or isolationism.

My own summary is that the writing is not great. It's good journalism and typical of Kaplan's other books. The book is thoughtful and even important for the issues it explores as he travels across the United States. And it's particularly good in giving credit and recognition to some older history books, like the Devoto ones, that deserve to be read more these days.

Jim Fonseca says

The author is a think tank guy in foreign affairs and he has 17 books on that topic and travel. In this book he looks inward to US history and geography and how "American exceptionalism," due to our geographical richness and our history of westward expansion, has shaped our world view that leads us to remain a major and an interventionist world power.

This is not a new thesis. Kaplan distills the work of three earlier scholars who had lifetimes of work exploring these topics: Walter Prescott Webb (especially *The Great Plains*, 1931); Bernard DeVoto (especially *The Year of Decision 1846* published in 1942, and *Mark Twain's America*, 1932) and Wallace Stegner, (especially *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West*, 1954).

Kaplan brings us up to date on how he sees all this relating to modern events by taking a 30-day cross-country trip surveying the landscape and eavesdropping on people in restaurants to see what they are talking about. (He's writing just before the recent presidential election.) So we get a lot of glib generalizations from his overnight stays such as the tackiness of modern suburban auto culture and fast food restaurants; the appalling sameness; what state lines you cross to see more or less obesity; how tourists at Mt. Rushmore are "families" but those at Zion National Park are more international and yuppie (although he doesn't use that word).

Small towns with colleges tend to have more of an international flavor and more upscale restaurants. He recognizes the unemployment, the hardship and the devastation in old steel towns like Portsmouth, Ohio and Wheeling, West Virginia. And given the timing of this book, we understand that when he talks about industrial devastation vs. upscale towns with colleges and an international flavor he's really talking about Trump Town vs. Clintonville. The former folks are old fashioned nationalists; for the latter, their international outlook has "uprooted them from their terrain." Kaplan tells us that only people in the Northeast commonly talk about politics in public.

When you already have 17 books and, one assumes, a following, your editor lets you get away with a lot of sloppiness. There are errors: when he writes of the devastation of Wheeling, West Virginia compared to the more upscale Marietta Ohio, 100 miles away, he attributes that partly to the oil shale boom, but that boom in

Ohio is actually across the river from Wheeling, not close to Marietta. Six times (count 'em) we hear how teaching of US history in schools and universities is overly focused on the evils of slavery and the genocide of the American Indians. Four times we hear that Russia's rivers flow north into the emptiness of the Arctic whereas American rivers are ideally oriented for transport. Three times we read that the USA has more navigable inland waterways than the rest of the world combined.

Another theme that he plays is the juxtaposition of presidents Lincoln and James Buchanan (1857--1861) and their presidential homes. Lincoln was the first frontier president and Buchanan, from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, was a continuation of the line of eastern upper class presidents. Then Theodore Roosevelt switched from the eastern aristocracy (his home, Sagamore Hill on Long Island) to become a gun-toting western frontiersman. Kaplan tosses in a few references to the arts focused on America: the Hudson River school of painting; Walt Whitman's poems. Yet another theme is the "verticality" of the East vs. the "horizontal" landscape of the West. A comparison of the USA vs. China also runs throughout the book culminating with a final section on "Cathay." (Remember, Kaplan is primarily a foreign affairs scholar.)

It's a good compilation and review of the broad generalizations that make up a lot of "big thoughts" of American history and politics. Useful to think about as long as you take them with a grain of salt. "We became a nation, in part, by first becoming an army." "The New Jersey Turnpike is central to the identity of this most crowded part of the country." "The horrifying fact is, as King Philip's War proved, removing the Indians was eminently practical for the settlers..." "...the Great Plains stopped slavery in its tracks, predetermining the defeat of the Confederacy." He references Walter Russell Mead on the political outlook of Americans as being Wilsonian, Hamiltonian, Jeffersonian or Jacksonian (Trumplanders).

Broad generalizations are fun to think about. They always have a grain of truth in them. But it's also a good metal challenge to think about disputing them. Sure, Russia has many geographical disadvantages in Siberia, such as its rivers flowing north, but even without Siberia, Russia is a huge, geographically rich nation. Sure, cotton could not grow on the Great Plains, but in an alternate universe, could the South have used slaves to grow wheat and herd cattle?

Kaplan tells us that Webb wrote that "...The Great Plains...invented the cowboy tradition, by providing the perfect natural environment for men on horseback to manage large herds of cattle over substantial distances." Who am I to dispute Webb, but here it is from other scholars: cowboy culture, cattle herding on horseback, started on the central Meseta of Spain; was imported to Mexico and migrated north to the American plains. That's how horses came to the Americas, of course, and then the Indians adopted them. The best evidence is in the language of cowboy culture and all its Spanish-derived words: mesquite, sombrero, hacienda and bronco, Spanish for wild horse. Vaquero (cowboy) became "buckaroo" which also gave us "buck" as in "bucking bronco." Chaparreras (leg armor) became chaps; pinta (spot) became pinto, a spotted horse; la reata (the rope) became lariat; lazo (rope noose) became lasso; estampida became stampede; rodear meaning round-up, became rodeo; arena (sand) gave us arena, etc.

In the last section, Cathay, Kaplan takes us around the world, especially focusing on his book "The Coming Anarchy: Shattering the Dreams of the Post Cold War:" stop thinking things will get better. Although imperialists took over with bloody conquest, afterwards they generally kept order, established rudimentary education systems (the old "white man's burden" concept) and stepped in to prevent massacres of minorities, which may not happen now. And the Cold War for all its faults let developing countries play off the US against the USSR for goodies. Now the only thing left outside the urbanized, industrialized West is often just chaos, worsened by social media that can encourage divisiveness and factionalism rather than centralization

and authority. China has the geographical advantages we have; Russia does not. Chinese weakness and economic troubles, not strength, are a danger to us because that is when insecure national leaders start rattling swords to ferment nationalist feelings by picking on outside enemies to preserve their power. Beware the educated, Eastern “imperial class” and the press that wants us to intervene everywhere there are troubles – that’s a bottomless pit.

Agree or disagree, thought-provoking stuff.

Painting of wagon train from minibiz

Picture of Wheeling, WV from Encyclopedia of Forlorn Places, eofp.net

Tom Mathews says

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 Harpers’ 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 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 America 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 'not worth what I paid for it' 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.

Aida Ghazar says

I expected a serious book from Kaplan, a deeper study of geography and history on the title: "Earning the Rockies". But it is not. It is as if written in haste and just for the sake of publishing. Repeating himself frequently throughout the book, and lecturing and tutoring. He gives his 'word of wisdom' then goes on, in the last 20 some pages, asking direct questions and answering them himself.

By the way I did not understand what he means when he writes that the Ottomans protected the minority rights ,Page 145: "In the early modern and modern eras, the multi ethnic empires of the Habsburgs and Ottomans, with their tolerance and cosmopolitanism, protected minority rights better than did the uniethnic states that followed them." This is not a fact and a naive judgment. No, the Christian ethnic groups such as Armenians, Assyrians and the Greeks were NOT protected under the Ottoman Empire!

No serious discussions, no thought provoking issues, and many a quotes from other authors which fills the book of 175 pages.

Conrad says

When you flip the book over and look on the back at the endorsements for this book by Henry Kissinger, Gen. David Petraeus and Gen. James 'Mad Dog' Mattis you realize that Kaplan has something important to tell you in this book. It is not politically correct - he speaks frankly about the dark side of America's history as well as its achievements, but he makes the case that America is exceptional and has a destiny/fate to be the world leader and to be the city on a hill or the beacon of hope for millions around the world.

Initially he draws on the history of the westward expansion and the doctrine of Manifest Destiny to describe how America grew to be the preeminent Superpower it is today. He then spends time in the latter pages to analyze the current geopolitical situation in the world and America's response to those conditions. He warns against the dangers of isolationism but balances it with a warning of getting bogged down in a foreign quagmire. Initially, he was a supporter of the war in Iraq but in retrospect he admits that it was a failed effort at nation building and that it is foolish for America to think that we can reproduce our grand experiment on other nation states that have a far different worldview from our own.

At only 180 pages this is really one long essay, but it packs a lot of information and a lot of ideas to consider.

Kaplan has traveled widely and written about many diverse parts of the world so this is a very well thought out book and one worth reading and pondering.
