SPECIAL REPORT

The Geopolitics of the American President

GPF | GEOPOLITICAL FUTURES

Table of Contents

Introduction

Americans are passionate about their presidents. Congress sees a potential ally or enemy, the Supreme Court pretends to see nothing, the experts see someone who can give them a job, and the civil service sees another irritant who will soon be gone. Yet the American public, rightly or wrongly, sees the face of the nation.

The founders knew that the state had to be personalized. A state as abstract as they envisioned could not survive, the competing ideologies and material interests of the colonists notwithstanding. Every other government official represents a fragment of the country, but the president represents the whole. Thus is the basis, or at least part of the basis, of America's presidential obsession.

Many believe that a leader's will is decisive, that what the president wants, the president gets. It's a reasonable and comforting assumption. People want to think that someone is in charge, and when things go wrong, people want to hold someone accountable. The idea that a president acts as circumstances dictate – that impersonal forces hold more sway than the whims of a single office – is terrifying. But that is the reality.

Geopolitics

One of the basic principles of geopolitics is that nations are complex and interlocking entities that pursue systemic ends. Leaders, democratic or otherwise, do not simply impose themselves on the nation but arise from the nation. Nations generate the regime, and the leader emerges from and serves that process. They are attuned to the complexities of their nations and position themselves to become leaders. And throughout their tenure, they remain agents of the forces that put them in power.

Geopolitics argues that nations are too vast to be ruled by any one person, particularly since no leader rules for very long compared to the life of a nation. The course of nations can be best understood by ignoring leaders and focusing on the impersonal forces that shape millions of people and cause the nation to act in certain and predictable ways.

The notion of free will often assumes people are free of constraints. Free will exists, albeit in certain frameworks of a place a person inhabits. Lives are lived within constraints, limiting the options people have to make the most of what is possible. In other words, necessity determines everything. The choices necessity imposes on people, and the vast amount of choices it precludes, chart the course of their lives. It is this concept of necessity that matters, and it applies to communities just as much as it applies to individuals.

For our purposes, the term "community" describes the wide array of political arrangements in which human beings organize themselves. There are tribes, cities, nations, empires – and within this array of groups there are innumerable ways to organize them. But they all share a single characteristic: leaders. How leaders are selected, what power they have and how they can use it varies widely, but in the end, all communities have leaders. The question of personal free will and necessity leads to the question at the core of geopolitics: To what extent does the nature and will of the leader matter? Is the leader trapped by the same necessities that ensnare the nation itself?

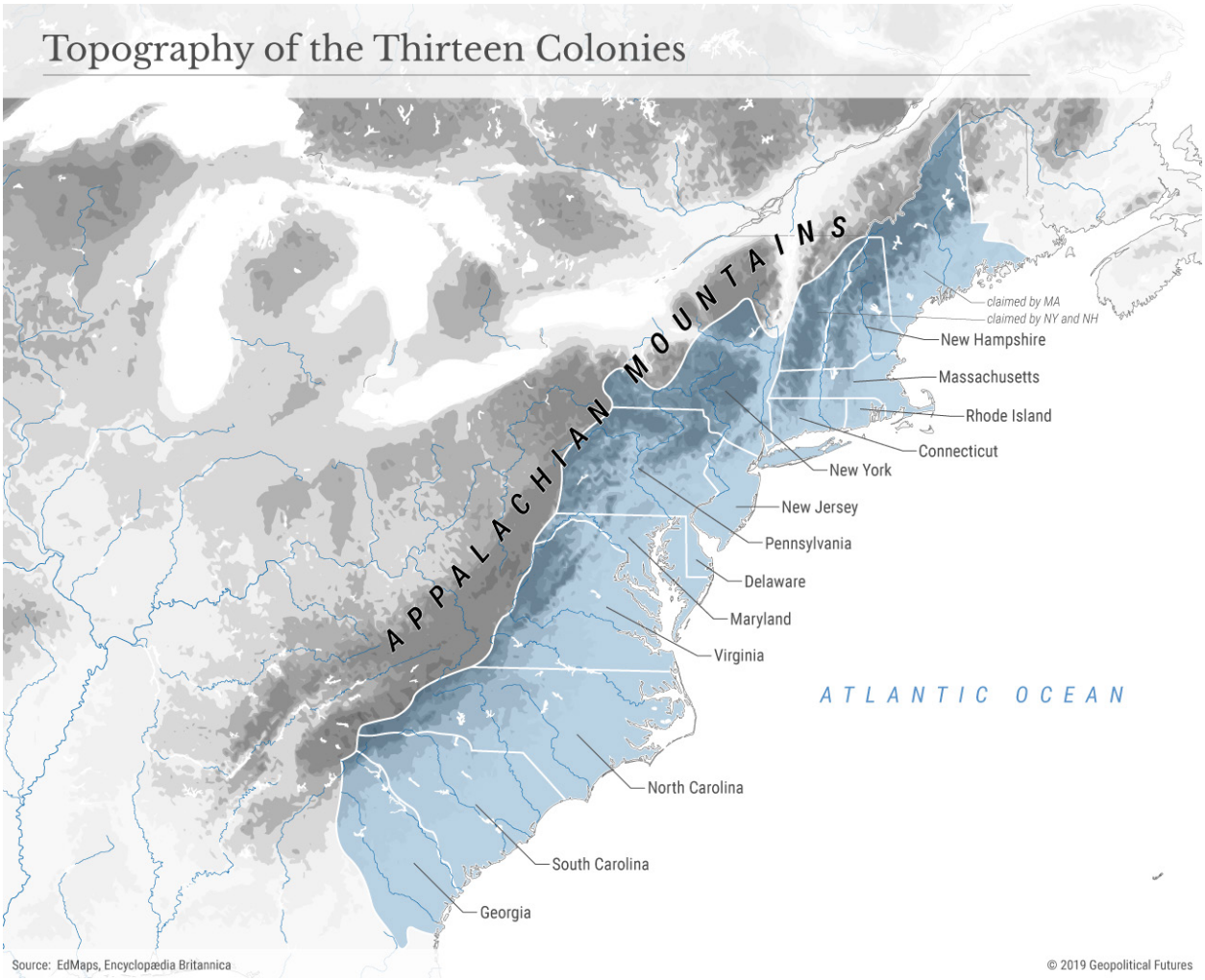
Which raises an even more urgent question: Do political leaders matter? Geopolitics is founded on two assumptions. The first is that a community's location defines the community. Second, the political system, particularly the leader, is hostage to realities it doesn't control, and the leader's decisions are shaped by those realities. To state it bluntly, on the most basic level, political leaders don't count.

When decision-makers are removed from the equation, one finds that the choices are few, and the decisions dictated. The obsession with the personality of leaders is natural. Leaders are the totems that comfort or frighten a nation. But rulers are forged in a culture born of the necessity of the times, they have been trained to understand the necessity, and they are constrained by reality.

Geography

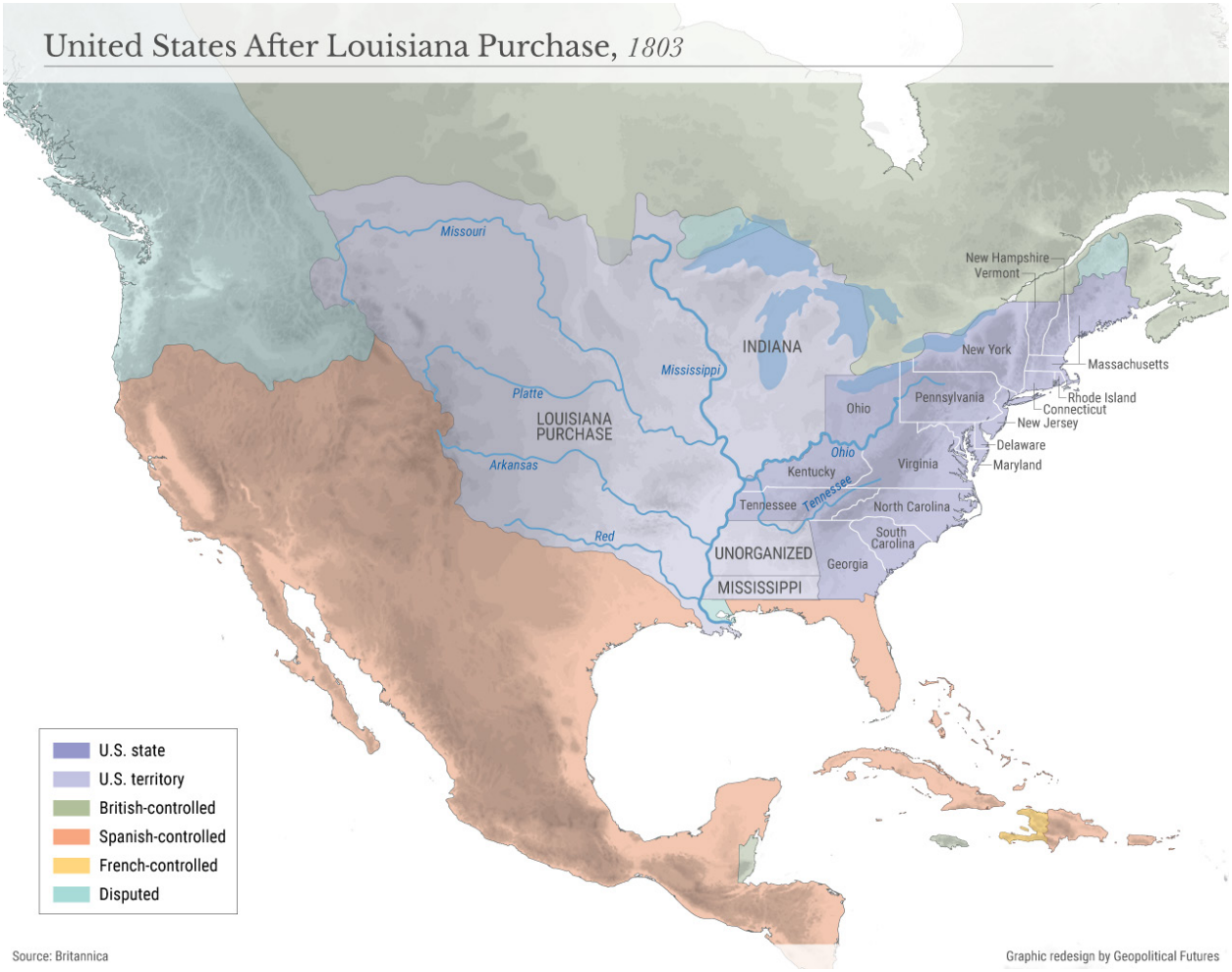
Little shapes the needs and constraints of a leader more than geography. And though geography may change over time, it does so slowly and is therefore critical to understanding the environment in which a particular form of governance emerges.

Three geographical features defined the English colonies and thus shaped the United States into the country it is today. The first was the Atlantic coast. Both the Jamestown and Plymouth colonies were funded by British investors who sought to profit from primarily agricultural goods produced along the coast that could be shipped to Britain. Over time, the long coastline allowed for more extensive settlement, the development of a North American shipping industry and an orientation to Europe.



The second feature was the river systems. In the south, the west-east flow of most rivers from the Appalachians to the Atlantic meant that north-south transportation, and even communication, was difficult. As a result, the southern colonies were isolated from the northern colonies and from each other. They saw themselves as distinct thanks to insufficient transportation networks, which would have been expensive to build. The northern colonies were less fractured. The rivers there ran north-south, the area was much smaller, overland transportation was much easier, and the colonies were less distant and distinct.

The third and most important geographic feature was the Appalachian Mountains, which formed the original western boundary of the colonies. The mountains were steep in places, and the vegetation made the area almost impassable except at a few points. One of the most important characteristics of the Appalachians is that they curve toward the coast north of Maryland. It's here that the terrain of the mountain range becomes much hillier and rockier compared to the south. South of Maryland, the Appalachians are a couple of hundred miles from the coast, and a large, relatively flat plain lay between them and the Atlantic.



Thus the south, unlike the north, provided perfect conditions for large agricultural undertakings, including plantations. This geographic distinction led to the primordial divide in the colonies: slavery. Plantation farming required free labor. In the north, there was no slavery because the economy couldn't support it. The economy there was built around small farms, shipbuilding, crafts and finance. The roots of the Civil War were shaped by this geography. The question of slavery was embedded in the different economic and social structures that evolved in the colonies, and it continues to shape socio-economic and demographic dynamics in parts of the country today.

U.S. geography evolved over the course of the 19th century through various land acquisitions by purchase or warfare. These acquisitions laid the groundwork for the country's future power projection capabilities.

Between the Appalachians and the Rockies, there is a vast valley, drained by several rivers, including the Ohio and Missouri. These rivers had an extraordinary set of characteristics. They covered a great deal of territory; many were navigable; and they all flowed into a single river, the Mississippi, which starts as a small stream in northern Minnesota but eventually swells into a vast highway. Settlers who built farms and ranches between the Rockies and Appalachians could ship their produce to the East Coast – and eventually to Europe – by floating their goods downriver on flatboats to where oceangoing vessels could meet them on the Mississippi.

In 1803, France was preoccupied with the Napoleonic wars and so wasn't especially interested in the Louisiana Territory. The United States needed that land to grow and develop exports, so it bought the territory, which included the entire Mississippi River and the critical port of New Orleans, for $15 million. The purchase gave Washington strategic depth and enabled the creation of a class of small farmers who could produce more than they could consume and who could sell their surplus wares to faraway markets.

New Orleans was the key to everything. If New Orleans were in hostile hands, the exports that generated surplus capital to help fuel America's Industrial Revolution would not get past the mouth of the Mississippi. In the War of 1812, the British attacked New Orleans, but Andrew Jackson defeated them and thus kept New Orleans and the Midwest in U.S. hands. However, even with the British gone, the U.S.-Mexican border was only about 200 miles away from New Orleans. In the classic paradox of American strategy, the desire to defend New Orleans triggered the Mexican-American War.

Prior to the Mexican-American War, the U.S. and Mexico were more or less on equal footing in terms of geopolitical power and

influence. Because of their proximity, they had overlapping interests in the Gulf of Mexico and New Orleans, making a conflict between them all but inevitable. The U.S. used American settlers to lay the groundwork for advancing its landholdings farther west. These settlers created the Republic of Texas, which was pursued by both the U.S. and the Mexican governments. By 1846, Washington opted for direct military confrontation with Mexico and conducted a broad assault that, after over two years of fighting, resulted in a U.S. victory.

The Mexican-American War achieved three things. First, it crippled Mexican military capabilities for over a century. Second, it created a barrier between Mexico and the United States. Third, it gave Washington control of all of northwestern Mexican territory, which included present-day California. This made it possible to secure the Louisiana Territory against any potential threat from the west and anchor the United States on the Pacific. It created the framework for the contemporary continental United States and established the U.S. as a North American power.

It was the Spanish-American War, however, that solidified America's position as the unquestioned power in the Western Hemisphere. It started in 1898 with a coup in Hawaii that gave the U.S. the only significant anchorage that could threaten the mainland. At the time, ships ran on coal, and they required coaling stations to refuel. With Pearl Harbor in American hands, no ship from Asia could reach the Pacific Coast of the United States.

That same year, the United States went to war with Spain, seizing Cuba and the Philippines. The seizure of the Philippines gave the United States the first offensive base in the Eastern Hemisphere. The seizure of Cuba made certain that no power could close off the exits from the Gulf of Mexico. The war also resulted in a massive push to construct a modern navy that could enforce the Monroe Doctrine through the Roosevelt Corollary.

Imperatives

For a country to survive, it must be secure. And its security depends on the pursuit and, ideally, the achievement of its geopolitical imperatives. The United States has five fixed geopolitical imperatives that were imparted by its new geography:

1. **Dominate North America**
2. **Prevent attack from South America by foreign powers**
3. **Control the Eastern Pacific and Western Atlantic to secure the homeland**
4. **Control all oceans to project power and control trade**
5. **Prevent the emergence of hegemonic powers in Eurasia**

The U.S. has achieved the first four major imperatives. The fifth imperative – preventing the emergence of Eurasian hegemonic powers – is an ongoing process that has brought the U.S. into World War I, World War II, the Cold War, and several other conflicts. The need to pursue these imperatives is a major constraint on any U.S. president, who must at least maintain the status quo for the nation to stay strong.

Constraints

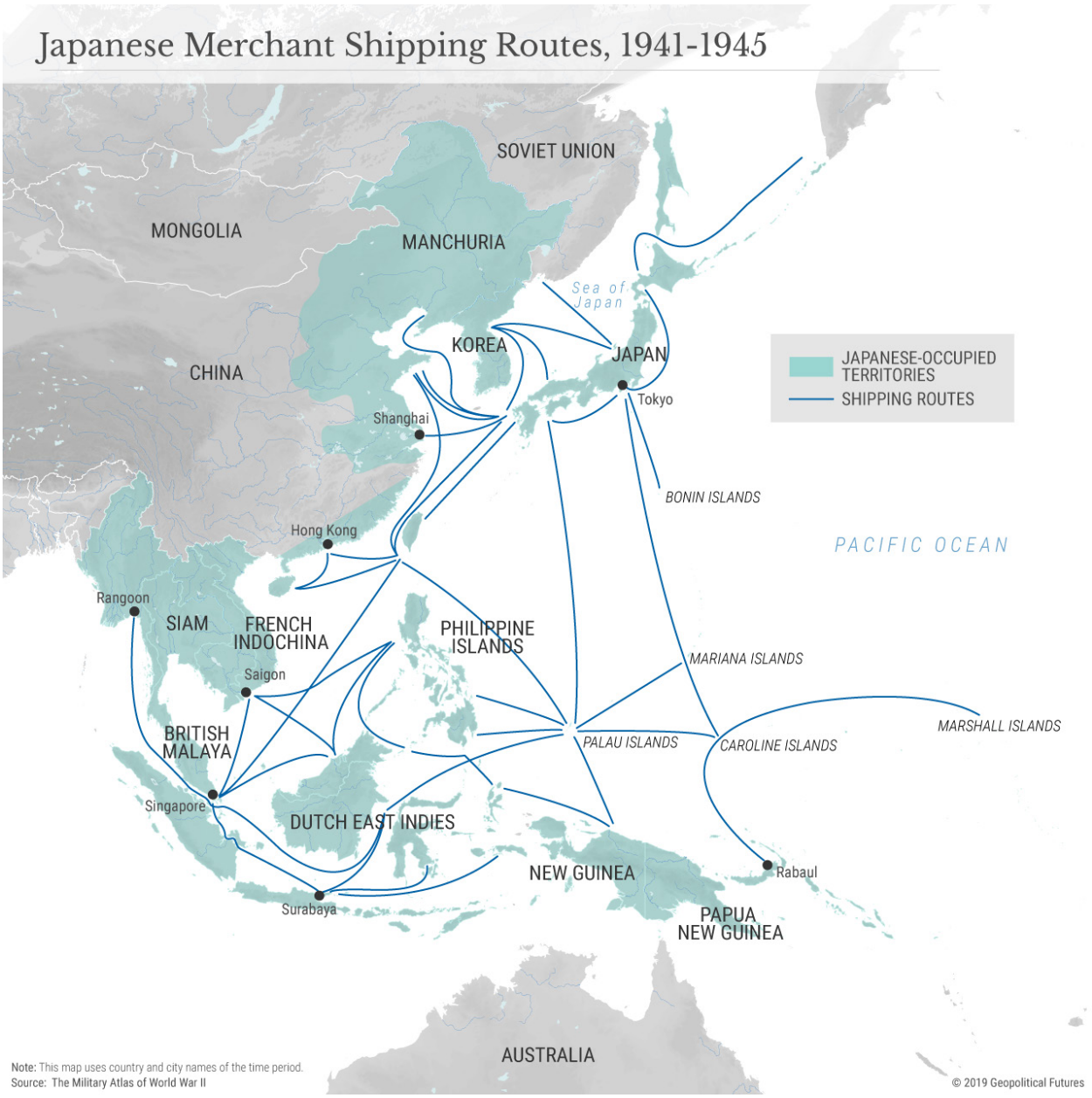
World War II – and specifically the conflict between the U.S. and Japan – is a case study in how leaders face and must respond to constraints. The United States is secure so long as no power can attack it from the sea or cut off its trade routes. Japan has almost no natural resources, and though it was an industrial power, it was able to become one only by importing virtually all of its raw materials. In 1941, Japan was importing most of these from Indochina and what is today Indonesia. The sea lanes it used ran past the Philippines, which was controlled by the U.S. If Japan could gain control of the Western Pacific, it would have unfettered access to the resources it depended on. U.S. control of the Pacific depended on the same islands that it would later break through en route to Japan. Both sides understood the danger they were in.

When Japan invaded Indochina in 1940, the U.S. grew concerned. Japan had treaties with France and the Netherlands that facilitated the delivery of raw materials there. When, during the course of World War II, Germany overran France and the Netherlands, control over these countries – and thus the status of their treaties with Japan – became uncertain.

The U.S. could not let Japan take control of the Western Pacific. The American solution was to cut off sales of oil and scrap iron to Japan, and to send agents to buy up all the Indonesian oil possible before the Japanese could get to it. The U.S. then moved toward a diplomatic settlement with Japan, in which the U.S. retained the power to strangle the Japanese economy but agreed not to do so – absent Japanese aggression. If the Japanese accepted this proposition, their country would exist only by American goodwill. This was impossible for them to accept.

Japan could neither withdraw from Indochina nor allow the U.S. to control Indonesian oil. But Japan could not secure these areas unless it controlled the Philippines, since U.S. air power and a fleet in the Philippines would be able to cut critical Japanese supply lines. Japan also knew that if it seized the Philippines, the U.S. would respond by sending its fleet before Japan could consolidate its control there. (In fact, the United States' War Plan Orange anticipated this.) Japan, therefore, had to destroy the American fleet at the beginning of the war. Hence Pearl Harbor.

The leaders of Japan and the U.S. were at the mercy of the reality of the Pacific, as



well as their respective institutional realities. Unable to attack Japan initially, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt had no choice but to hold steady first and then attack. Not attacking at all was not an option; the political system was shaped by the unfolding events. Similarly, neither Emperor Hirohito nor Prime Minister Hideki Tojo ruled Japan; rather, it was ruled by a complex of interests, all of which were highly sensitive to Japan's economic health and demanded pre-emptive action. Each country's strategic logic was closely paired with a parallel institutional logic. Neither Roosevelt nor Tojo had the power to act in any way other than the way he did. Each had some discretion in the details, of course, but in their broad strategic considerations, they could not have resisted

their institutions even if they had wanted to.

That is not to say Roosevelt and Tojo were irrelevant. On the contrary, they were indispensable agents of their nations. A leader becomes a leader because of a ruthless understanding of the nature of the nation and remains a leader by pursuing the nation's interests. Leaders go through an extended vetting and training process that forces them to understand the disciplines of political rule and the realities of their nations. The more they understand these things, the more powerful they become. Political power does not free leaders to be arbitrary; it drives them to understand what they must do. When faced with existential realities, leaders respond as they must.

Exercising Leadership

There is an element of public life that goes beyond geopolitics. Nations have an aesthetic sense of themselves. People live in a work of art crafted by their founders and themselves. It defines the population's sense of identity, and without that sense, societies rise and fall in a very squalid place.

Leaders must represent the best of their people. The exercise of leadership is meant to display the virtues the nation ought to have. They are required to show what is appropriate and what the state feels, even if they don't themselves feel it. A prime minister, a president, a king or a queen represents the country at critical moments, and their responsibility is to convey to the country how important they are to each other. A political leader must first lead, and in leading must gain the authority to make policy. A leader who wants to make policy and is indifferent to the task of leadership will fail.

To do what must be done, to believe completely in the purpose yet harbor an element of doubt or sorrow over what was necessary, is the essential dimension of being moral. It is not the evil that a person does because they are wicked that is the worst thing; it is the evil that a person does because they are good, and the evil that must be done to achieve the good. A good leader remains true to principles but understands that principles held so tightly that they cannot bend become a means for feeding righteousness and superiority over others, rather than a guide for improving the world. Such was the case with Abraham Lincoln. To heal the country after the Civil War, he had to forgive southerners, even if he couldn't absolve the South.

This is the purpose of leadership. A leader understands what is necessary. They also understand that governing, properly done, is more art than science. A leader paints a picture of who they are by what they say, by the gestures they make, and by framing an abiding concern for the nation. It is a concern that ought to be natural but in the greatest of politicians is crafted, sometimes in opposition to their nature. A leader who knows what is right and necessary in spite of their nature does something much harder: They convince others to believe in their virtue, and through them, in our own.

Balance of Power

The founders did not want a powerful president. The entire point of the Constitution was to avoid despotism, and toward that end, the president's ability to act unilaterally is severely limited. He must align with a legislature divided into two houses, each with different and bizarre rules. The Congress has the authority to pass or reject the president's initiatives and to appropriate money to fund them. Presidents face a Supreme Court that is often ideologically opposed to their policies. He also faces 50 somewhat sovereign states. But the truth is that the Federal Reserve Board has more power over the economy than the president. As to foreign policy, he is trapped by the realities of the powers arrayed in the world.

The American presidency was crafted for the unexpected moment, where fundamental decisions need to be made within hours or days. The most important decisions presidents make are the ones they were never prepared for and have no policy for. Think Truman and Korea, Eisenhower and Suez, Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis. What their pet programs might have been is irrelevant. They had no policies for the crises they encountered because they did not know what was coming. But absent major events, presidents operate within a system of checks and balances.

Civil Servants

Civil servants have served as a check to presidential power since 1871 and continue to represent the real mechanism beneath the federal government, controlling and frequently reshaping elected officials' policies. Prior to 1871, the president could select federal employees. Naturally, they selected loyalists who would do their bidding or the occasional stranger as a political favor to someone important. Sometimes, they would sell positions to those who wanted them for a host of reasons, frequently to make money from the positions they were given.

Carl Schurz, a German-born Union Army general, proposed the idea of a nonpolitical civil service. It would be both a meritocracy and a technocracy. Civil servants would be selected by competitive exams measuring their skills for the job. And the job of civil servants would be to implement laws passed by Congress in the manner the president wanted them enforced.

This meant that a civil servant could not be fired on a political whim, but rather for cause – e.g., failing to perform a job competently or refusing to obey instructions from the president. It also meant that institutional knowledge would outlive a president. A presidential term lasted four years; policies could last for generations. If administrators were replaced every time a president left office, as previously had been the case, there would be no continuity in government. New administrators would constantly have to learn the complexities of their jobs, and by the time they mastered it, they would have to leave.

As the state took more responsibility and its tasks became more complex, government administration had to be taken away from the politicians, who were unsuited to the job. On the surface, this was reasonable. It anticipated the dramatic growth of the federal government and created a structure to cope with its complexity. While this evolution was not included in the Constitution, it was not unconstitutional because the president and Congress remained in charge.

But like all things, it had unexpected consequences. If a civil servant could be fired only for cause and did not serve at the pleasure of the president, how could the president be certain that the policies being followed were legislated and ordered by him? The solution was to use a class of administrators appointed by the president. These were the Cabinet members, whose task it was to un-

derstand the president's will and verify that civil servants were doing as they were told. This was further compounded by the rise of independent agencies like the Federal Reserve, the CIA, and countless other autonomous and semi-autonomous agencies created to protect not only their permanent staff from political pressure but also the entire agency. The desire to limit political pressure was intellectually defensible, but in practice it created a system that could not be readily controlled. Among the independent agencies, even decision-making was opaque. Between the entities reporting to the president, there was a layer of political appointees, which created turbulence between the president and the civil service. In separating politics from administration, the creation of the civil service weakened the political system and strengthened the administrative one. That was the intention.

Experts

The president must contend with experts as well. Experts work in and out of government and believe that they should govern, and sometimes do. Expertise consists of detailed knowledge and experience in a field that permits you to undertake successful actions. An air conditioner repairman, a surgeon, and a financial engineer are all examples of experts. No reasonable person would argue against the need for expertise in the world. The questions, however, are whether expertise has limits, and whether excessive dependence on expertise to solve problems and manage human affairs might be at times insufficient and even harmful.

This is not a strange philosophical discussion but a very practical matter. In government-related affairs, experts lay claim to knowledge of relationships between nations that is superior to those who lack their education and experience. Their reasonable claim is that they should be relied on to manage U.S. foreign policy. Their counterparts in other countries make the same claim. The test of an expert is achieving the end to which expertise is intended. This raises the obvious question of what value expertise is if the result is failure.

Experts are indispensable technicians, but they have lived narrow lives. Politicians have lived broad ones. They've had to. A president making decisions alone with his advisers has frequently committed grave errors of judgment. Presidents who commanded forces in a partnership with Congress – and therefore the consent of the governed – have consistently done better and borne greater burdens.

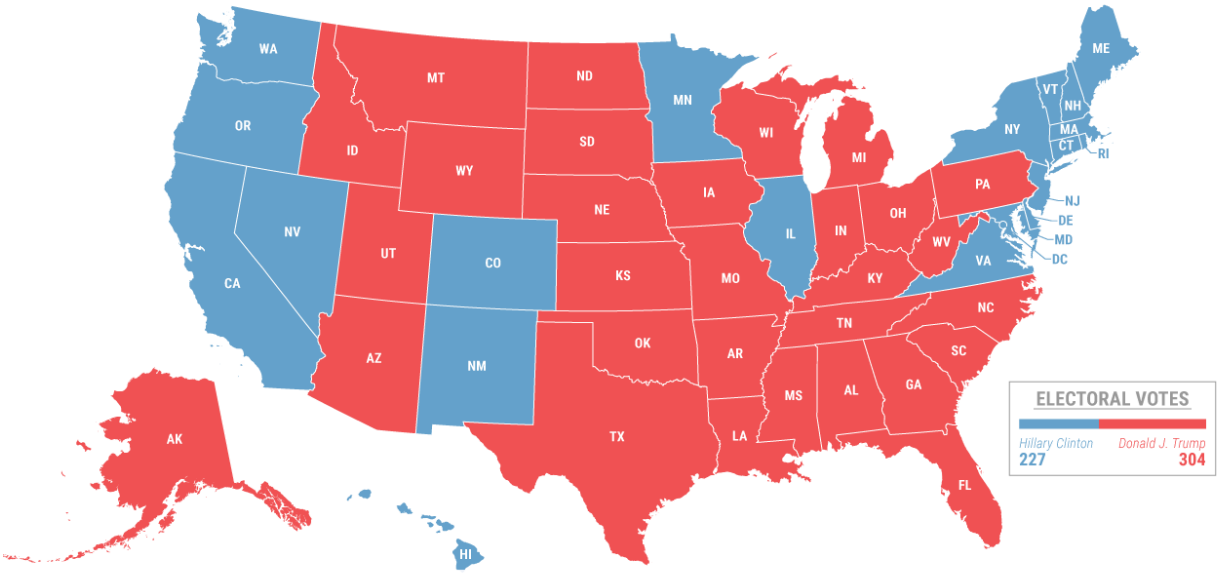
The Electoral College

The U.S. presidency is unique in that someone can be elected to the country's highest office without winning the popular vote – something unheard of in most other democratic nations. Though this has happened just five times in U.S. history, it has happened twice in the 21st century.

The president of the United States is elected by the Electoral College, which comprises individuals selected by parties in each state who cast their votes in accordance with the popular vote of the state. In other words, if a candidate wins the popular vote of a given state, they win the entirety of that state's electoral votes. (There are a couple of states with different processes.) However, legally, an Electoral College member's vote is their own, and they are empowered by the Constitution to use their judgement as they see fit. The Electoral College gives each state a number of electors equal to their two senators and the number of representatives apportioned to them. No state has fewer than three electors, and therefore any state can determine an election, and all regions, no matter how lightly settled, must be considered.

The founders chose this method for a number of reasons. First, the founders wanted a bulwark against the passions of the public,

U.S. Presidential Election, *2016*



Source: U.S. Electoral College

something that would mediate between public opinion and national policy. They needed another institution that could provide checks on the others. The founders didn't want political parties, as they feared factionalism, so they envisioned an institution that could negotiate, compromise, and create a coalition to elect a president by majority. The Electoral College was created to solve political deadlocks without making the president a prisoner of the House of Representatives. The second reason was state governments. The United States was a coalition of sovereign states, which wanted assurance that one state would not override the interests of the others and no state would be completely excluded from the presidential process.

The United States was (and is) a vast nation with highly variegated interests. From the beginning, the founders were forced to face the fact that holding the nation together required concern for the interests of all states, and not only for those densely settled. The system the founders produced compels all presidential candidates to pay serious attention to underpopulated states. Without the Electoral College, the idiosyncratic interests of small states would receive little notice, while a broad national marketing campaign, insensitive to significant regional differences, would decide the result.

U.S. Electorate

Relatedly, every election has a geographic dimension. American voters differ by region, class, ethnicity, and a host of other distinctions. Many of these distinctions evolved over time as geographic and economic needs shaped the society and people living in that space.

At the core of this geographical divide are economic, social, and cultural changes that took place over the past several decades. Whereas Midwestern manufacturing was once the heart of the American economy, for example, much of America's wealth has flocked to the West Coast in response to the rise of the high-tech sector. These sorts of changes bring with them socio-economic and demographic change that, in turn, alters electoral strategy. For instance, there has been a consumer shift away from industrial products toward services and digital products; foreign companies have gained a larger share of the U.S. market; and more U.S. companies have moved overseas to improve competitiveness.

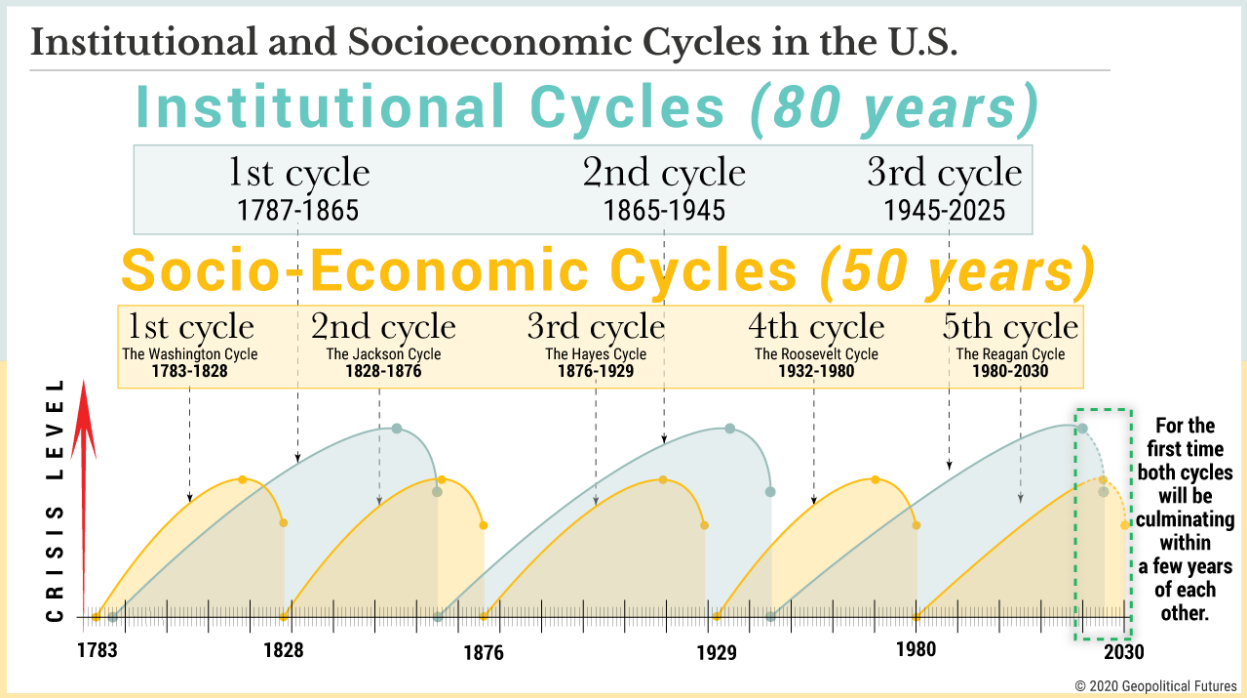
Cultural divisions between economic sectors aren't anything new. At the turn of the 20th century, there was deep cultural animosity between the new urban industrial working class and the agricultural class. But presidential elections have always shared a common theme: elation and respect of supporters, and the despair and contempt of opponents. This is a natural part of democracy. Voters are searching for a solution to their problems and look to the political sphere for solutions. In doing so, they imbue leaders with extraordinary powers. A leader becomes an icon of all the hopes and fears of a nation. Never mind that a leader's followers differ by region, class, ethnicity, and so on. Constant hostility very often occurs between these groups because all societies are divided. An election forces a confrontation between these different groups, their competing hopes and mutual contempt. The distinct groups want to elect a leader who will help them and punish the others. In the end, most of the political maneuvering entails convincing enough people that you speak for them and not the others.

Cycles

U.S. history, and especially its political history, must be viewed in cycles. The U.S. undergoes an 80-year institutional cycle and a 50-year socio-economic cycle. The institutional cycle primarily affects the federal government, while the socio-economic cycle primarily affects the public. But these cycles are set to converge in the late 2020s, at which point the U.S. will experience social and political upheaval.

Approximately a decade before a crisis starts, new socio-economic problems emerge. The election of former President Donald Trump did not mark the arrival of a crisis, but it did foreshadow the anticipated arrival of one in the 2020s. The defining internal economic problem confronting the U.S. today is a decline in the middle class's purchasing power. A generation ago, members of the middle class could not only buy a home, they also could enjoy an occasional indulgence, vacation, or superfluous purchase. That is no longer the case.

Nothing about this process is mechanistic, but there are patterns in how we live and govern ourselves. The failure of social issues to get better, the intensification of economic problems, and the extreme intensity of the friction between federal institutions are markedly different from the ones at the



beginning of other cycles with the elections of Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan. Both of them transitioned effectively from social and economic crises. But the rage and mutual loathing of today are odd.

The intensity of the ongoing social issues is striking. Issues that are moral, religious, and cultural are tearing at the American system. Bank failures, and the reality that caused them, are compounding instead of overtaking these old events. Complicating the situation is the 80-year institutional cycle. Questions about the relationship between federal institutions like the Supreme Court and Congress compound the normal distrust between the public and its institutions.

Ongoing social issues such as race, gender equality, and guns create a public division that affects the functioning of government. Relations within the political system at all levels are increasingly venomous. Coming economic problems will breed increasingly desperate and simplistic solutions, further drawing capital out of the financial system. The current political system cannot manage the situation. A solution must emerge now to be presided over by the next president.

It's impossible to predict every consequence, but the process will likely play out in six phases.

1. The common sense of the previous era delivers a social, economic, and military crisis.

2. The political system increases the applications of strategies of the prior era, thereby increasing the pain and the public anger.

3. A political upheaval occurs within the framework of the political system, bringing new political figures to a position of power to arrest the challenges of the old common sense.

4. The president, who represents the old common sense, sidelines this new political force, applying the old common sense and thus creating a crisis.

5. A full-scale revolt brings to power a president and a Congress that know the old system has failed but are uncertain what the solution is. They bring the illusion of change.

6. A set of solutions begin to emerge, slowly at first and then more rapidly, until the basic assumptions of the United States are changed and a new common sense is in place.

History suggests that a shift of this magnitude takes about eight years. From the Roosevelt era, it took around two years to install a new president but about 10 years to significantly solve the problem. Around the 1870s, change took about five years, and real change took a little longer. Even if the presidency changes in two years, this transition will take a while.

Conclusion

The president is a symbol designed not to unite us but to define our divisions. They clarify our differences and set the stage not for reconciliation but for the political debate that the founders knew to be eternal. Presidents can be either loved or hated, but by representing the country as a whole, they hopefully limit conflict. They cannot get things done on their own. Changes rarely happen the way presidents intend.

MISSON STATEMENT

Geopolitical Futures understands the world through the rigorous application of geopolitics: the political, economic, military and geographic dimensions that are the foundation of nations. The imperatives and constraints contained in these define the nation. We study the past to understand the future. At its core geopolitics assumes, as does economics, that events are governed by these impersonal forces and not by individual whim or ideology.

Geopolitical Futures is rigorously non-ideological. Our staff may have their personal beliefs, but they must check them at the door. Therefore, we strive to be objective and indifferent to the opinions swirling around the world. We believe that liberal democracy can survive only if there is a segment of society, which we call the learned public, who is not caught up in the passions of the moment, but is eager to look at the world as it is. It is this learned public that will influence the political system toward the prudence that flows from understanding, and whom we serve with the methods we have developed.

Above all, Geopolitical Futures is an intellectual undertaking, an ongoing experiment in finding order in the apparent chaos of the world. We are a business that lives the life of the mind.

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