

“7 Maps That Explain The United States' Strategy” By George Friedman

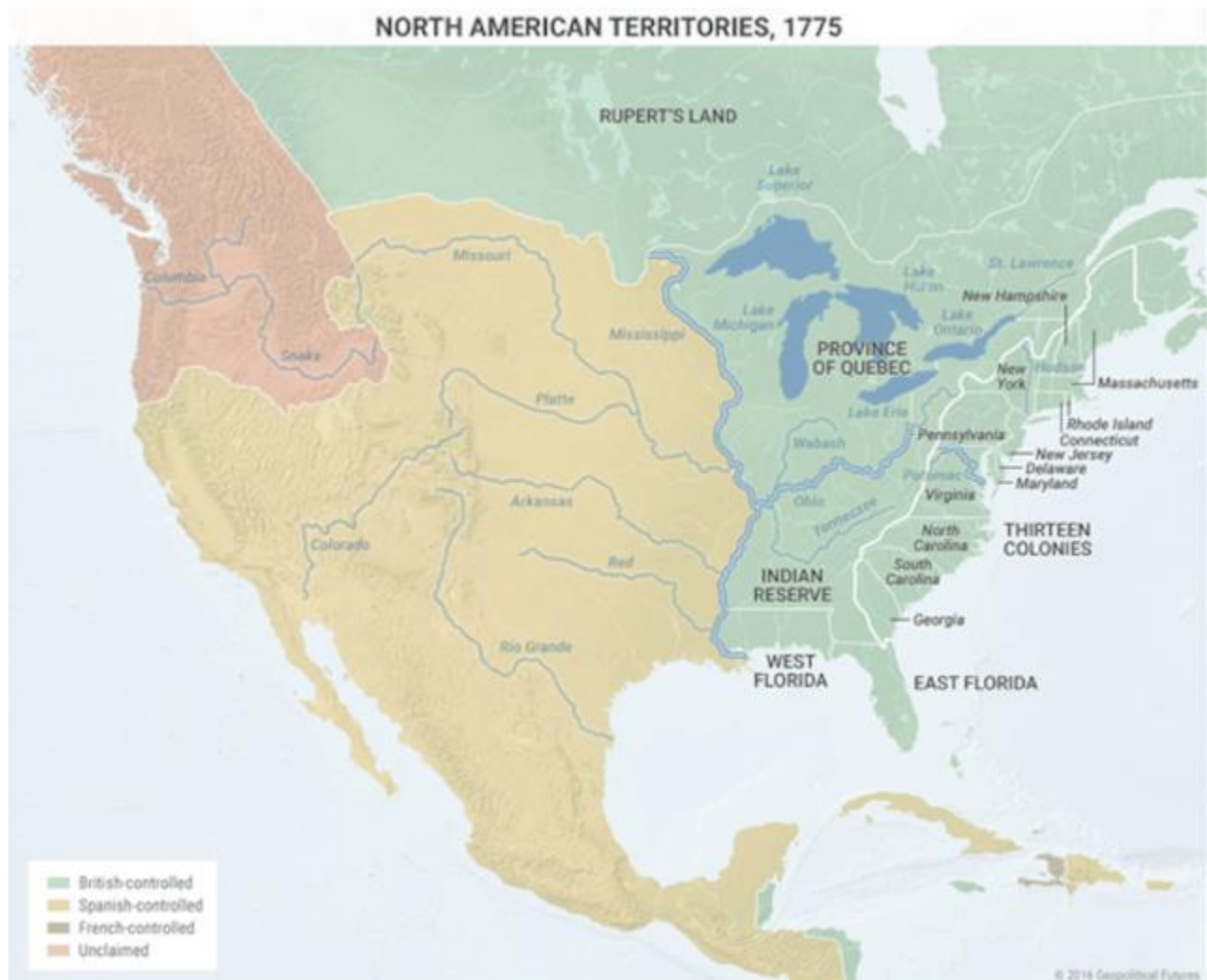
What is striking about American strategy is its paradoxical nature: The fact that each solution to a threat poses a new threat.

Since its birth, the United States has sought to defend itself. The US approaches each threat with a constant outward movement of attention and resources... and now, it straddles the world.

This means that the political, economic, and military postures of the United States have tended to be offensive.

The Birth of a Nation on the East Shore

Consider the US at the time of its founding. The colonial United States existed on a relatively thin strip between the Appalachian Mountains and the Atlantic Ocean.



Its north-south communication was weak, as most rivers run from the mountains to the Atlantic. That meant that commerce and movement of troops to repel invasion were difficult

Therefore, even after it declared independence, the United States was heavily dependent on maritime trade with Europe, and particularly England. At the time, England dominated the Atlantic Ocean, especially after the defeat of Napoleon and the destruction of the French navy.

The United States had lands west of the Appalachians, but they were minimally settled. Its heartland was a narrow eastern strip close to the Atlantic Ocean, and it was vulnerable to the British navy, which could carry out amphibious operations at any point along the coast.

Navies are expensive, and the United States couldn't guarantee its national security until its economy had developed dramatically. That was difficult as long as the US was confined to the eastern seaboard. If it could not block British naval power, then it had to have strategic depth: The West.

Extending to the West



The land west of the Appalachians was extraordinary—not just because of its rich soil, but also because of the Mississippi River system. Two great rivers, the Missouri and the Ohio, flow into the Mississippi.

They are joined by other smaller but very significant rivers like the Arkansas and Tennessee. They flow into the Mississippi, which then flows into the Gulf of Mexico.

The most extraordinary thing about this river complex is that it is navigable. That means that virtually any part of the land between the Rockies and Appalachians could not only produce agricultural products—and later minerals—but could also ship them inexpensively through this river system and eventually to Europe.

The United States was assigned ownership of the Northwest Territory (today the states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, and part Minnesota) in the 1783 Treaty of Paris.

By 1800, it had already settled much of the territory and created new states and territories. But that land could not be fully exploited because the Mississippi River system was ultimately controlled by the Spanish and then by the French. Neither significantly colonized their North American holdings, save for French Canada. The Spanish interest was precious metals, while the French wanted expensive furs. They hadn't sent settlers into the area and so hadn't cleared land and farmed it.

The English colonized the land and after independence, so did the United States. But their territories lacked one thing: New Orleans. And without controlling New Orleans—the Mississippi's gateway to the ocean—farmers would not have access to world markets and would simply subsist on what they grew.

Louisiana for \$3 million

New Orleans was the key to North America. Sea-going vessels could not go very far up the Mississippi. The flat-bottom barges that brought the wealth of the Midwest down the Mississippi could not venture out to sea.

New Orleans developed at the point where ships and barges could each safely meet. The barges exchanged cargo with the ships, which then carried it to Europe.

Of course, to get to this point, the plain between the Rockies and Appalachians had to be settled and farmed. This westward expansion achieved two things. The first was an enormous increase in economic power. The second was strategic depth.

In 1803, France was engaged in the Napoleonic Wars for domination of Europe, and Napoleon was not very interested in the Louisiana Territory. For the Americans, and particularly for President Thomas Jefferson, it was an obsession.

The US bought the territory for \$3 million dollars, which even in today's dollar was an absurd amount—about \$230 million. That price included the entire Mississippi River and New Orleans.



The defense of New Orleans became a central interest of the United States. During the War of 1812, when the British destroyed Washington, they also attacked New Orleans.

Future President Andrew Jackson defeated the British there and kept control of New Orleans and the Midwest. Jackson remained properly obsessed with New Orleans. It was the key to American power and prosperity. It was also still in danger.

The Mexican-American War

The US-Mexican border was only about 200 miles away from New Orleans. In order to defend it, the Mexicans had to be pushed back. This was not a trivial fear.

The United States had a small standing army spread through a large territory. The Mexicans had a larger army, and if they massed a force, they might be able to take New Orleans and strangle the United States.

In the classic paradox of American strategy, the desire to defend New Orleans triggered an attack on Mexico in two parts.



First, Jackson asked Sam Houston to organize American settlers in the northeastern section of Mexico and foment an uprising designed to, at the very least, block Mexican access to the region... and at best, create an independent country, the Republic of Texas.

This was accomplished in 1836 when Sam Houston defeated Mexican forces under Santa Anna at the Battle of San Jacinto, near today's Houston.

The second stage took place in 1846 when the United States, now more militarily capable, conducted a broad assault on Mexico—including amphibious operations that led to the capture of Mexico City.

The Mexican-American War achieved three things from the American point of view.

First, it crippled Mexican military capabilities for over a century. Second, it created a barrier between Mexico and the United States. After the war, there was a string of deserts and mountains south of the new border that made any possible counter-move by Mexico difficult. Finally, the US took 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.

The defeat of Mexico, the seizure of the northwest, and the lack of a realistic threat from Canada secured the United States in North America and created a new fear: naval threats in the Atlantic and Pacific.

The United States was secure from anything but naval action.

Fear of the British Naval Power

Again, defense required offensive measures. The first step occurred in 1898, with a coup d'état in Hawaii that gave the US 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.

In the 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, and therefore New Orleans.

Yet, the United States retained a primordial fear of Britain because it was the dominant naval power in the world. Although the US was building a substantial fleet, the British still dominated the Atlantic.

In spite of neutralizing Cuba, the Bahamas could still block one exit from the Gulf of Mexico. It symbolized the American fear.

It should be added that the threats the US faced were not theoretical. Besides the threat from Mexico, the British still controlled the area north of the United States, and Britain was much more powerful than the United States and imperially ambitious.



Taking Over the Atlantic

The United States remained suspicious of British intentions in the northwest, but also harbored a fear of both an offensive south toward New York and a blockade of the East Coast.

Neither of these came to pass, but the American strategic culture was to assume the worst case and generate potential responses.

Interestingly, as late as 1920 when the United States was preparing war plans to confront potential enemies after World War I, one of the plans outlined the defense against a potential British invasion down the Hudson Valley.

This fear of the British was not addressed until World War II, when London needed American destroyers to protect convoys heading for Britain. The United States gave them the destroyers... but at a price.

The British had to permit the United States the use of all of their naval bases in the region—in Newfoundland, the Bahamas, Jamaica, St. Lucia, Trinidad, Antigua, British Guyana, and Bermuda. Given American resources, the ability to use the bases was the ability to dominate them.

Lend-Lease, as it was called, essentially was the British surrender of their naval facilities in the Western Hemisphere to the United States. It transferred control of the Atlantic on a line from Iceland (occupied by the US in 1940) to Bermuda to Trinidad.

This gave the United States control over the Atlantic approaches to the US (once German U-boats were dealt with) and effective control of the Caribbean. With this, the United States achieved its defensive goal of controlling the maritime approaches to its territory.

As the United States increased its power, it increased its fears. North America can only be threatened from the sea, but creating massive fleets able to pose a threat to the US is enormously expensive and requires substantial technical ability.

The best way to defeat a fleet is to never allow it to be built. In this case, divert the resources of potential challengers from naval construction to land warfare.



The Containment Strategy

The fear of the United States in both World War I and World War II was that a single power, Germany, would conquer Europe. Lacking land-based threats, Germany would be free to construct fleets at its leisure and challenge the US from the sea.

This fear led to the American intervention after World War I when weeks after the Russian czar fell, it appeared that German troops in the east would be transferred to the west and overwhelm the British and the French alliance.

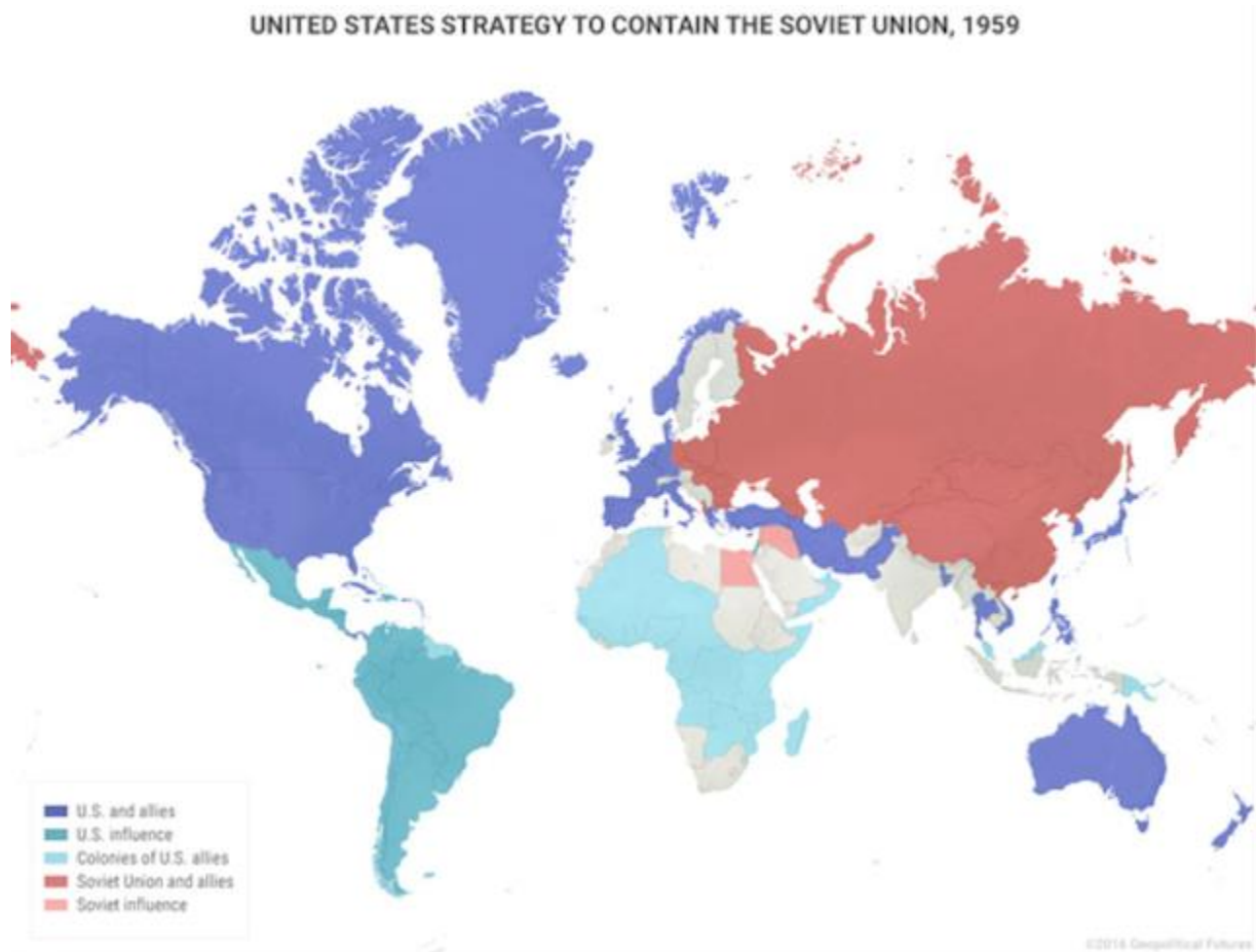
This fear also led to the US engaging Japan and Germany simultaneously in World War II. After defeating the Japanese navy and the German U-boats and co-opting the waning British presence, the US emerged from World War II as the first power in human history to dominate all of the world's oceans.

The World Wars cemented control of the seas as the single most important element of American strategy. The vital corollary that followed was that the US must maintain a balance of power, particularly in Europe and Asia, to prevent the construction of navies.

During the Cold War, the United States developed a strategy of containment. The Soviet Union would be surrounded on as many fronts as possible by American allies, backed by American power.

This was meant to prevent Soviet expansion into Europe and threaten the Soviets with the possibility of an attack along its entire periphery.

It also forced the Soviets to expend vast resources on defense along its land borders—resources it then could not use to build a navy sufficient to force its way through the choke points discussed in our “Mapping Russia’s Strategy” article.



The collapse of the Soviet Union, in large part due to the strain its defense budget put on its economy, was not a fully intended or expected consequence of US strategy.

After the Soviet Union fell, the United States had no strategic challenger. Its new fear was that such a challenger would emerge—this time from minor regional hegemons growing into major ones. The fear, once again, was that these would in time have the resources to challenge the United States globally.

The Twenty-First Century Fears

The automatic response to any potential hegemonic power, therefore, was to attempt to co-opt, destabilize, or destroy it before it could threaten the United States. Participation in the Balkan War, the destruction of Saddam Hussein, and confrontations with China in its coastal waters have been rooted in this deep structure of American strategy.

The American strategy has drawn the US into the Eastern Hemisphere at seemingly random intervals since the Cold War. Here, it discovered a paradox and a limit to its power.

The United States has the power to destroy any conventional military force. It does not have the ability to occupy and pacify countries. Put differently, it could deal with threats but not stabilize the countries, as it did with West Germany and Japan.

The threat that emerged was not naval power, but terrorism. This is a lesser, yet still painful strategic problem that the United States must deal with today. It cannot tolerate potential hegemonies like Russia and can effectively destroy their military capacity. However, it cannot deal with the consequences of its actions.

The point is that American strategy has been part of the deep structure of the United States since its founding. Its geography generated defensive fears, which it solved with offensive action. Yet now, the deep structure of the US has created a new kind of problem that historical strategy cannot address.

Eventually, the sheer scope of US power generated the threat. Every nation has its grammar of strategy, the manner in which it engages in strategic problems. The United States has been extraordinarily effective in sequentially and elegantly addressing its fears. And now, as always, the solution creates the new problem.