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

Robert D. Kaplan
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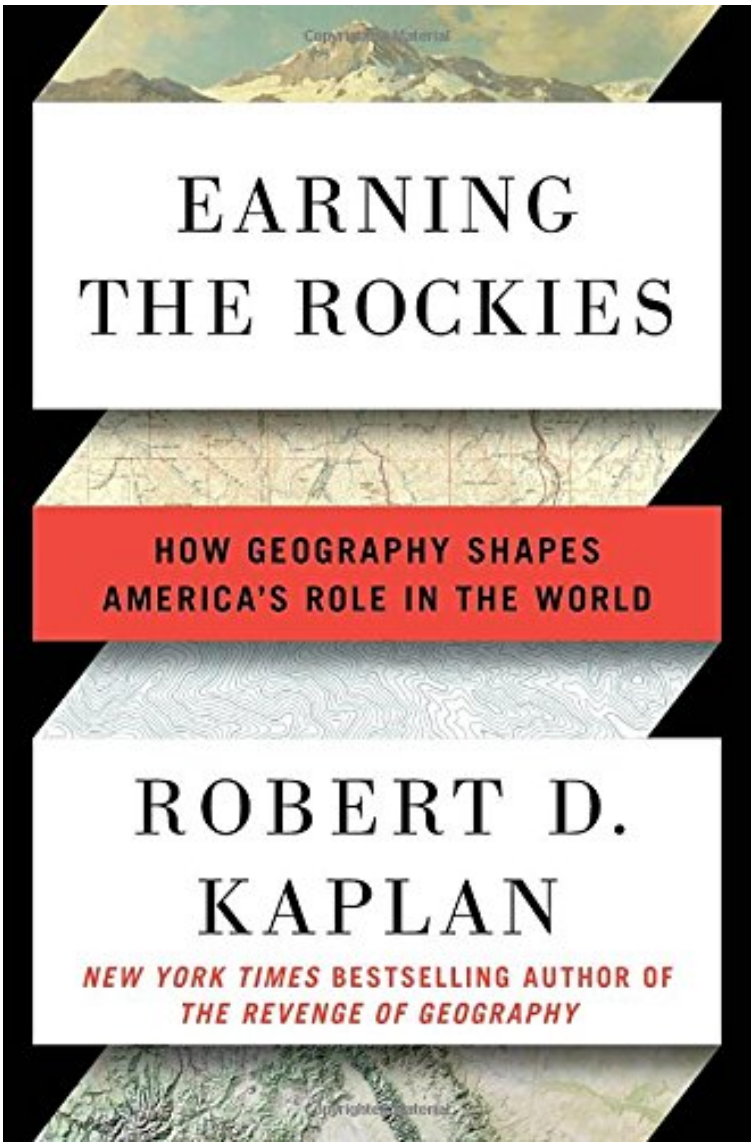

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Robert D. Kaplan : Earning the Rockies: How Geography Shapes America's Role in the World before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Earning the Rockies: How Geography Shapes America's Role in the World:

44 of 47 people found the following review helpful. What the heck happened in November?By T. J. MathewsThere

are memoirs of road trips that are guaranteed to stand the test of time; Francis Parkmans 'The Oregon Trail', John Steinbecks 'Travels with Charley', Jack Kerouacs 'On the Road', and Ernesto Guevaras 'The Motorcycle Diaries' to name just a few. Robert D. Kaplans 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 fathers tales of travel and the books of Harpers columnist Bernard DeVoto (Dont worry. I hadnt 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 Americas journey west over the centuries. Although manifest destiny and American exceptionalism are terms often heard in conjunction with discussions about f 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.Kaplans 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 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 theoreticalIdealized 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 if 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 couldnt compete with a Wal-Mart thirty miles away? Much of the world that these people yearn for is gone and they know it isnt coming back. But still if a politician comes to their town and says I here you, and I am with you, dont 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 American 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 aint broke, dont fix it.*4 Stars It could stand for a few tweaks here and there but its 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.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Kaplan goes somewhat beyond the pale.By Ben W. WashburnKaplan is a masterful and engaging writer, and is an effective apologist for many of the embarrassing wrongs of our past nation. He probably goes, however, beyond what the most of us would consider a justification for latter-day manifest destiny. Yes, as a nation, we need to look-out from a defensive position for what we need to do internationally to defend ourselves from foreign threats, and that sometimes requires that we take the lead in some international relationships. But, Kaplan goes well beyond that need.1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. So GoodBy S. DionMy husband is re-reading this book a second time. In fact, he bought a hard copy so he could use yellow highlighter. I am now reading it; an interesting perspective on why we are so politicized geographically. Highly recommend.

An incisive portrait of the American landscape that shows how geography continues to determine Americas role in the worldfrom the bestselling author of The Revenge of Geography and Balkan GhostsAs a boy, Robert D. Kaplan listened to his truck-driver father tell evocative stories about traveling across America in his youth, travels in which he learned to understand the country literally from the ground up. There was a specific phrase from Kaplans childhood that captured this perspective: A westward traveler must earn the Rockies by drivingnot flyingacross the flat Midwest and Great Plains. In Earning the Rockies, Kaplan undertakes his own cross-country journey to recapture an appreciation of American geography often lost in the jet age. Traveling west, in the same direction as the pioneers, Kaplan traverses a rich and varied landscape that remains the primary source of American power. Along the way, he witnesses both prosperity and declineincreasingly cosmopolitan cities that thrive on globalization, impoverished towns denuded by the loss of manufacturingand paints a bracingly clear picture of America today. The history of westward expansion is examined here in a new lightas a story not just of genocide and individualism, but also of communalism and a respect for the limits of a water-starved terrain, a frontier experience that bent our national character toward pragmatism. Kaplan shows how the great midcentury works of geography and geopolitics by Bernard DeVoto, Walter Prescott Webb, and Wallace Stegner are more relevant today than ever before. Concluding his journey at Naval Base San Diego, Kaplan looks out across the Pacific Ocean to the next frontier: China, India, and the emerging nations of Asia. And in the final chapter, he provides a gripping description of an anarchic world and explains why Americas foreign policy response ought to be rooted in its own geographical situation. In this short, intense meditation on the American landscape, Robert D. Kaplan reminds us of an overlooked source of American strength: the fact that we are a nation, empire, and continent all at once. Earning the Rockies is an urgent reminder of how a nations geography still foreshadows its future, and how we must reexamine our own landscape in order to confront the challenges that lie before us. Praise for Earning the RockiesThere is more insight here into the Age of Trump than in bushels of political-horse-race journalism. . . . Earning the Rockies is a tonic, because it brings fundamentals back into view.The New York Times Book Review (Editors Choice) A sui generis writer . . . Americas 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 authors point is a good one: America is formed, in part, by a geographic setting that is both sanctuary and watchtower.The Wall Street JournalA brilliant reminder of the impact of Americas geography on its strategy. . . . Kaplans latest contribution should be required reading.Henry A. Kissinger Unflinchingly honest, this refreshing approach shows how ideas from outside Washington, D.C., will balance Americas idealism and pragmatism in dealing with a changed world.Secretary of Defense James Mattis

There is more insight here into the Age of Trump than in bushels of political-horse-race journalism. . . . Earning the Rockies is a tonic, because it brings fundamentals back into view.The New York Times Book (Editors Choice) A sui generis writer . . . Americas 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 In his long career as a foreign correspondent, Robert 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 authors point is a good one: America is formed, in part, by a geographic setting that is both sanctuary and watchtower.The Wall Street JournalA text both evocative and provocative for readers who like tothink 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 sEarning the Rockiesis a brilliant reminder of the impact of Americas geography on its strategy. An essential complement to his previous work on the subject of geostrategy, Kaplans latest contribution

should be required reading.Henry A. KissingerRobert D. Kaplan uses Americas unique geography and frontier experience to provide a lens-changing vision of Americas role in the world, one that will capture your imagination. Unflinchingly honest, this refreshing approach shows how ideas from outside Washington, D.C., will balance Americas idealism and pragmatism in dealing with a changed world. A jewel of a book,Earning the Rockieslights the path ahead.Secretary of Defense James Mattis Earning the Rockies is a thoughtful, engrossing, eloquent reflection on the United States westward expansion to fill our continentand on the implications of the resulting national character for the current debate about the proper role of America in the world. Heres another masterpiece by Robert D. Kaplan.General (Ret.) David PetraeusRobert D. Kaplan has given us a great gift in this intelligent, engaging, and memorable book about America at home and abroad. Jefferson believed our national fate inextricably linked to the West; Kaplan shows us how true that remains all these years distant.Jon Meacham, Pulitzer Prize-winning author ofAmerican Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White HouseAny Robert D. Kaplan road trip is bound to be compelling, butEarning the Rockiesis all the more so for crossing America.Like Kerouac and Tocqueville, Kaplan makes us see the country in a wholly new way. This concise classic is highly recommended.John Lewis Gaddis, Pulitzer Prizewinning author ofGeorge F. Kennan: An American Life What a fine, stimulating, energizing, and thoroughly original book . . . All diplomats and soldiersindeed, all Americans with power or the hope of powershould read Robert D. Kaplan generally, and this slim volume particularly.Simon Winchester, New York Times bestselling author of Pacific: The Ocean of the FutureAbout the AuthorRobert D. Kaplan is the bestselling author of seventeen books on foreign affairs and travel translated into many languages, including Earning the Rockies, In Europes Shadow, Asias Cauldron, The Revenge of Geography, Monsoon, The Coming Anarchy, and Balkan Ghosts. He is a senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security and a senior advisor at Eurasia Group. For three decades his workappeared in The Atlantic. He held the national security chair at the United States Naval Academy and was a member of the Pentagons Defense Policy Board. Foreign Policy magazine twice named him one of the worlds Top 100 Global Thinkers.Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.IEarning the RockiesIf I dont remember my fathers name, who will?My fathers name was Philip Alexander Kaplan. He was born in Brooklyn in 1909. I dont recall him ever at peace with his life. I do remember him looking serene once at Valley Forge, among the oaks and maples and magnolias; clustered among the numerous birches and pine trees; and a second time among other hardwoods at Fredericksburg. These are trees I could not name when I was young but learned to identify on later visits to those hallowed sites, and to other sites on the Eastern Seaboard that the memory of my father inspired me to see. For it was only at such places, away from our immediate surroundings, that my father became real to me, and real to himself.In particular, I remember him at Wheatland, James Buchanans handsome Federal-style home with the air of a southern plantation in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. There I peeked my chin over the protective barriers into sumptuous mid-nineteenth-century rooms, with their dark walnut desks and other antique furniture, along with the French china, glittering crystal, and gilded mirrors. Yes, I remember a grand piano there and many shadowy bookcases and lithographs. For long spans of my childhood my memory is vague, but it lights up with minute detail about what matters most to me. Wheatland, where President Buchanan lived, worked, headquartered his campaign for high office, and died, really mattered to me as a child. I was only nine, but my father in those rare moments spoke to me almost as though I were an adult, even as he was so full of tenderness.My father laid out the fundamentals of Buchanans failure as president, perhaps the worst in our history: a story necessarily simplified for a nine-year-old. Of course, later in life I would fill in most of the details.Whatever the multitude of factors in the three-way election of 1856, James Buchanan was by no means an accidental president. When he assumed office in March 1857, he appeared to have everything going for him. Arguably, no man in the country was better qualified for the task of calming the festering North-South split over slavery. He was a tall, reasonably wealthy, self-made, and imposing figure, someone who, aside from being a bachelor, was truly good at life: a former congressman, senator, minister to Russia in the Andrew Jackson administration, secretary of state in the James K. Polk administration, and minister to Great Britain in the Franklin Pierce administration; a talented and accomplished operator, a man of maneuver gifted at the fine art of compromise despite his stubbornness. He knew what buttons to push, in other words. Who else was possessed of the political savvy necessary to save the Union? Few were shrewder. Except for one thing, as it would turn out: Buchanan did not have a compass point toward which to navigate in the midst of all the deals he tried to make, and he had a distinct and fatal sympathy for the South. But mostly he was all ambition and technique without direction. Moreover, he was a literalist. He had a small vision of the Constitution and the frontier nation: he did not believe he and the federal government had the right to dictate terms to the southern states. He saw the good in both the pro-slavery and anti-slavery points of view. With his legalistic flair, he might have made a very competent president in more ordinary times; he was a disaster in extraordinary times. The country finally came apart under his watch. It turned out, he just, ehhh, didnt have what it takes, a father whispered to a nine-year-old boy at Wheatland.The basic security of the world in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has depended greatly upon the political unity of the temperate zone of North America. And that almost didnt happen. It was my knowledge of both Buchanans many gifts and his abject personal failure as presidenta knowledge first granted me by my fatherthat provided me with a deeper awareness of just how difficult making epochal decisions in the moment of crisis can be. It was this very awareness about Buchananhow good he

looked at the beginning of his administration and how bad he turned outthat always made me think later in life, Thank God we had Lincoln. What Buchanan ultimately lacked, despite his rsum, Lincoln had in abundance: character.But Buchanans failure was secondary in my fathers eyes that day at Wheatland; primary was the fact that Buchanan was, nevertheless, part of the vital tapestry of American history. Therefore, he was well worth knowing about. Great presidents cannot be understood in isolation; one requires knowledge of the not-great presidents who preceded and succeeded them. Indeed, we need always to see history as a whole, we cannot appreciate the good without knowing the bad, and vice versa. This is especially true of westward expansion. Wheatland made Americas past come alive for me.It was at a hotel in Lancaster during that same trip that my parents bought me a volume of American travel articles written in easy Readers Digest style, suited to my age. One story was about a family driving west and stopping for breakfast at a diner somewhere in Nebraska perhaps, on the Great Plains (or the Great American Desert as it was once known), anticipating the sight of the Rocky Mountains, where they were headed. You have to earn the Rockies, the father says to his wife and children, in my piercing if inaccurate childhood recollection of the story, by driving across the flat Midwest and Plains. Perhaps it was meet the challenge of the Rockies. In any case, earn the Rockies is a phrase that has stayed with me my whole life. It sums up Americas continental geography, the continent that Lincoln united and realized, and the significance of the Rocky Mountains as a geographical fact that should only be encountered by first crossing the Eastern Seaboard, the Middle West, and the Great American Desert, for that was the way that they were encountered in all their sudden and terrifying magnificence by European settlers and pathfinders, those who could not have known what exactly lay over the horizon.Throughout my childhood I yearned to see mountains higher than the Appalachians. As a family, we never left the eastern states. The Rockies were just too far, and my parents simply lacked the means, though my father talked about them often. The phrase earn the Rockies helped spur me to travel, something also instilled in me by my father since I can remember.My mother and father took me on that trip through Pennsylvania in 1962. Alaska and Hawaii had only recently been admitted to the Union. The United States back then, for a while yet, still thought of itself as only a continental nation, stretching, according to both the song and the clich, from sea to shining sea. To this day, Alaskans refer to the rest of the country as the Lower 48, meaning the contiguous forty-eight states that constitute the temperate zone of North America. Arizona was the last of the Lower 48, admitted to the Union only in 1912, a little closer in time to that trip through Pennsylvania than that trip through Pennsylvania was to the moment at which I write.America was a different country then, vaster and emptier. Valley Forge was not in the suburbs of Greater Philadelphia as it is now, nor Fredericksburg near the suburbs of Greater Washington, D.C. Food was more distinctivewith far fewer chain restaurants and grits widespread in eating facilities just south of the nations capital. People drove and rode buses, or hitchhiked across Americaas I did in the summer of 1970much more often than they flew. The Interstate Highway System was spanking new, and thus the Pennsylvania Turnpike and New York State Thruway constituted exotic experiences, with rest stops offering sit-down dining with waiters and waitresses. Those magical highways could transport you from the Atlantic Seaboard all the way to the very rim of the Midwest! The East Coast was much more of an adventure then than it is now. And there were few crowds anywhere.It had its dark side, though. I remember stopping for lunch with my parents at a restaurant called Lowerys in Tappahannock, Virginia. It was the spring of 1964, just a few months before the Civil Rights Act, and we were returning north from a visit to the Yorktown Battlefield. There was a sign at the entrance as we opened the door: Whites Only. I saw my parents look uneasily at each other, something that communicated fear to an eleven-year-old boy. We went inside, ate quietly, and noticed everyone glancing at us. It was clear that we were not locals and therefore not entirely welcome.Those trips were the gemstones of my childhood. It is in the midst of recalling them that I cherish the memory of my parents the most. Returning from those trips I was able to see, as though a shocked outsider, the grainy, almost black-and-white surroundings of our home in Queens: the sooty fire escape and other blockhouse apartments were the only view from the stifling kitchen where we ate. Because of the clash between where we had been and where we lived, those early travels, I believe, burdened me with something I was never entirely comfortable with: a cruel objectivity. In the morning we had been at Wheatland seeing the feast of glittering greenery outside James Buchanans mansion; that same night we were back in our apartment, hearing the yelling of our neighbors in other apartments. Seeing the wider world, if only a glimpse of it, had come with a price. I learned early that comparison is painful and not always polite, but it is at the root of all serious analysis.My father was a truck driver with a high school education who listened to classical music on WQXR while breezing through the New York Times Sunday and weekday crossword puzzles. He had a small record collection that included the patriotic band music of John Philip Sousa and the hits of Al Jolson, mixed with a little Stephen Foster. It was music that took you from the mid-nineteenth century to the first decades of the twentieth, telegraphing the countrys latent dynamism as it crept toward World War II. There was also in this singular and awkward repertoire the haunting twangs of Ferde Grofs Grand Canyon Suite from 1931, with their hopeful intimations of travel. In the 1960s, my father was decades behind his time. As I grew into middle age, I realized how grateful I was for it.In the spring of 1961, my father took my family, including my older brother and a cousin, on a trip to Washington, D.C. It was particularly memorable because on the second night he got us tickets to hear the Marine Band play Sousa at Constitution Hall. Between such transformative momentsWheatland, the Marine Bandwas the weeping undertow of my childhood: every late afternoon,

my father, hunched over the unmade bed that was visible from the windows of apartment houses directly across, tying the laces on his work boots, lost briefly in a trance, preparing for another night of driving in the partial wasteland of Brooklyn. Facing him in the bedroom was his small collection of books, two shelves actually. I remember The Conquest of Everest by Sir John Hunt (1954), Beyond the High Himalayas by William O. Douglas (1952), Jefferson the Virginian by Dumas Malone (1948), and one he had just bought, and that he anticipated reading: Travels with Charley: In Search of America by John Steinbeck (1962).In the 1930s my father had spent his twenties riding railway cars around the United States, earning a living as a horse-racing tout in forty-three of the lower forty-eight states. After a big score he would check into a first-class hotel, a large cigar in hand: twenty-four hours later, he would be living a hobos existence like so many others in the 1930s. He filled me with stories of his escapades in Depression-era America, and of the predominant image of a still-pastoral and nave nation, where the scams he ran were relatively innocent and people bought you a meal when you were down and out. I have a picture of him, powerful in the way of a photo negative, with a jacket and tie and sharp fedora, wearing a confident smile with which I could never associate him when I was a child, taken at the Texas State Fair in Dallas: the year 1933 emblazoned above him.Beulah Park (Columbus, Ohio), Arlington Downs (DallasFort Worth), Churchill Downs, where he watched Bold Venture win the Kentucky Derby in 1936my father knew literally every racetrack in the country. There were Houston and New Orleans in the winter of 193334; by freight train (the Union Pacific) from Pittsburgh to Chicago to Las Vegas the following year; sick, broke, back on his feet. It was an epic existence, however aimless, seedy, and pathetic at the edges, as well as full of exaggeration in the telling.My fathers last memory of travel was in 1942. He had just completed basic training at Fort Polk, Louisiana, and was heading north on a troop train for dispatch to Europe, where he would serve in the U.S. Army Eighth Air Force in England. At a rail junction near Cairo, Illinois, the sun was setting in rich colors over the prairie. Other trains were then converging from several tracks onto a single line that would take the troops to points along the East Coast, where ships to Europe awaited. Across a wide arc, the only thing he saw were trains and more trains, with soldiers looking out through every window as each train curved toward the others against a flat and limitless landscape lit red by the sun. Just looking at that scene, thats the moment when I knew we were going to win the war, he said to me, smiling briefly at the recollection as he completed tying his shoelaces.My first map of the United States was composed of my fathers images. It was a landscape full of lessons and marvels that I desperately wanted to experience firsthand. The flat prairie was something I never imagined as dull but, rather, as an immense and magnificent prelude to something grander. I thank my father for that. And thus I would make several journeys from coast to coast: once in my late teens, hitchhiking, fueled with curiosity, obsessed with just seeing the West; then as a middle-aged journalist, writing about social, regional, and environmental issues; and now, finally, in my middle sixties, somewhat chastened by international events, hoping to learn something about Americas place in the world by simply looking at the country around me.