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GEOPOLITICAL THEORIES COMPARED

A Lecture Delivered
at the Naval War College
on 16 September 1953
by
Dr. Harold Sprout

Gentlemen of the War College:

I often feel a little bit like apologizing — intruding a mere professor upon a group of practitioners of the craft of naval power. It might amuse you to learn that when I published my first book, *The Rise of American Naval Power*, I began to get fan mail from naval officers on ships and on shore. Several of those letters said: “I can’t quite place you. What class of Annapolis were you in?” I had to confess to them, in reply, that at the time I had never set foot upon a naval craft of the United States. Since then, that deficiency has been slightly rectified.

I come here this morning talking about a subject which I am convinced no one alive is really competent to discuss: that is a critical comparison and evaluation of the theories (hypotheses) which have been advanced which had a tendency to hook up the grouping of lands and seas, of resources and climate, and other earth factors, with the distribution of political power in the broad sense — military power in the specific sense — upon the earth’s surface.

I am using the word “geopolitical” in a completely neutral sense — it is a word that became an epithet in the 1920’s and 1930’s; it became identified with the German program of “conquest, war, racism,” and perhaps it is not yet completely decontaminated. It is a shorthand expression for “the relationship between geographical and other factors in the distribution of power in the world.”

When one starts to inquire into geopolitical hypotheses about the distribution of power in the world, there are some things about which he immediately should be on guard. For example: Very few of these hypotheses reflect dispassionate objectivity. Most of them reflect a specific nationalistic viewpoint; most of them were formulated in the heat of some kind of a crisis, in a period of tension; most of them reflect advice to a particular government — a policy which, if followed, it was hoped would achieve some desired result.

One can take three outstanding figures to illustrate this. Captain Alfred T. Mahan, whom I regard as America's foremost geopolitical thinker to date, was first and last an ardent propagandist for United States territorial expansion overseas; for a powerful navy at a time when the United States had virtually no navy at all; and for large American participation in the affairs of Europe and Asia. If one recognizes this conceptual framework within which Mahan worked, one will not be misled into drawing unjustifiable conclusions from his works.

Another example: Sir Halford Mackinder, a British geographer, later a member of Parliament, director for a time at the London School of Economics, University of London — and Mahan's opposite number in Great Britain — spoke always as a conservative British Imperialist; a man who was generally satisfied with the things as they were around the world, who was alarmed by the growth of rival empires, and was anxious to contrive a formula that would enable Great Britain to survive as a world power.

Then take General Karl Haushofer who poured into his geopolitical writings the bitterness and frustration of German defeat in World War I; who borrowed and adapted theories from Mahan, Mackinder, and others with the manifestly nationalistic purpose of putting Germany back into the top rank of great powers.

Men have speculated on the relationship between geographical factors and the distribution of power in the world for many

centuries, but it is with the period since 1890 that we should be chiefly concerned. Since that date a bumper crop of geopolitical theories has flowed from the presses of Europe and America. A complete list of those who have ventured into this arena of analysis, speculation, and propaganda would be enormous and would include many quacks and charlatans as well as informed and competent analysts. Among the better known names on such a list one would find Friedrich Ratzel; his American protege, Ellen Churchill Semple; Captain Mahan; Sir Halford Mackinder; another British geographer, James Fairgrieve; a German general, turned geographer, Karl Haushofer; a Dutch-born professor at Yale, Nicholas Spykman; another Yale scholar, Ellsworth Huntington; the late Dr. Isaiah Bowman, and many others. In any list, I am convinced that Mahan and Mackinder would stand at, or close to, the top, if not for their originality at least for the breadth and sweep of their views and for the impact which both have had on subsequent thinking and statecraft.

I would like to begin, therefore, with a fresh look at Mahan and Mackinder; then to take up, more briefly, some of the variants and derivatives of their theories; and, also, certain other hypotheses presenting substantially different geopolitical explanations of political action and of the geographical distribution of political power upon the earth.

Before taking up any one of these men, specifically, I might note my own classification of these theories. There is one group of theories which ascribes greatest importance to the groupings of lands and seas and other phenomena of location, space, and geographical configuration. The names that head that list are Mahan and Mackinder.

It should be noted in passing in respect to this group that their thinking has often been colored by the kinds of maps which they looked at and studied. Surprisingly enough, it is only in fairly recent times that most political geographers have studied the globe as a sphere. If you know the particular map projections that were

in common use at a given time, it will often tell you quite a little about the thinking of the men who studied those map projections. As we go along, I think we can see how some of the theories reflect misconceptions that are probably attributable to certain map projections.

In the *first* group I would put Mahan, Mackinder, and others who ascribe greatest importance to the grouping of lands and seas. the *second* group of geopolitical theories includes the ones which ascribe greatest importance to the geographical distribution of material resources. In this group, you will find a number of leading geologists; among others, an anonymous study made some years ago, which I will refer to later. A *third* group of geopolitical theories are those which ascribe greatest importance to spatial and temporal variations of climate, variations of climate in different places at a given time and variations of climate through time at a given place. The names that stand out in America foremost in this field are Ellsworth Huntington and, more recently, Mr. Clarence Mills of the University of Cincinnati, a medical doctor who is working in the field of experimental medicine and whose challenging article about "Temperature Dominance Over Human Life" I suggested be circulated here for you to read.

Returning to Mahan, one has to say, first of all, that it is very hard to condense his propositions into a short statement. A very prolific and prolix writer, I find him a very difficult theorist to interpret. He modified and qualified his opinions a good deal from time to time and nowhere did he set down in concise form — in a single article or in a single book — the main outlines of his thoughts. He scattered them through a series of naval histories and scores of magazine articles on technical naval subjects and on current affairs. One has to put together bits and pieces and make the best one can of it. This operation entails the risk that the analyst — the synthesizer — may not do justice to the source. The analyst's own bias may easily distort the thought of his subject — in this case, Mahan.

As I read Mahan, his theory seems to run about as follows: that the key variable — governing the geographical distribution of political power upon the earth — has been in the past (and will continue to be in the future) the capacity of states to set the terms on which the oceans and connecting seas may be used as a medium of transportation. There is an elaborate rationale behind this, but it would take all the time remaining to develop it fully. Mahan's proposition grew out of his conviction that sea communications would always be so much more efficient and copious than land communications (he had no concept whatsoever of air communications), that the use of the seas was the *sine qua non* of material prosperity and of national power.

At the same moment, while he regarded sea power as the basis of national power, he never in his whole life systematically developed the concept of *total national power*; not to my knowledge, at least. His closest approach to a general theorem of power is to be found in the opening chapters of his first major work, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History*. He there attempted to classify the variables which affect the results attained (or, potentially attainable) by the competing states. These, Mahan divided into two main groups: one group called *geographical factors* and the other called *human or social factors*. With respect to the *geographical factors*, he emphasized three points: (1) the concept of *location*; (2) the concept of *defensive strength*, and (3) the concept of *resources*.

The most carefully developed of these three is the concept of *location*. This is Mahan at his best. He developed over and over again in his writings the concept of central position, and differentiated strategic central position from geographical central position. For example: The British Isles were on the periphery of Europe, and geographically exterior to the continent. British lines of communication to all points in the Mediterranean, in comparison with lines of communication overland from the center of Europe, were geographically exterior. But Mahan makes the point over and over

again that it was not the distance traversed that mattered; it was not the geographical position on the map that mattered; it was the time that it took to get from one place to another; the amount of energy (or cost, to put it in economic terms) of transporting a given amount of tonnage from one place to another, and the speed with which one could do it.

His argument was that in terms of cost, speed, and capacity, England could move more tonnage by sea to more places on the European coastline than any continental state could by land. Consequently, in a strategical sense, Britain's position was central, Britain's lines were interior — although in a purely geographical sense Britain's position was peripheral, and Britain's lines were exterior.

He linked this concept with the concept of *defensive strength*, by which he meant simply the ease or the difficulty — i.e., the economic cost — of making a position secure against attack. Here, the point which he made over and over again was the concept of *insularity*, against the concept of *continentality*. By insularity he meant that the state in question alone occupied a land area that was surrounded by water. Under that definition the British Isles, of course, was an insular state and Japan was another insular state. But he also said that to all practical purposes if a state occupied a *continental* position and had no continental neighbors who were power rivals, that state also was strategically insular — as was the case of the United States with no strong neighbors to the north or south and water on the east and west. Thus, in practice, the United States could be regarded as insular as Great Britain.

Mahan's third point, *resources*, was the least well-developed and reflected Mahan's inability throughout his life ever to come to grips effectively with the problem of industrial war potential. His discussion of resources is limited very largely to discussions of such things as docks, machine shops, and other facilities needed to service ships. He never did really come down to a discussion of

coal, iron, soil fertility, and all the other resources essential to building the industrial capacity which supports a great national power.

Mahan was also weak in the discussion of *human* or *social* factors. His discussion of population is particularly disappointing. He seems to have regarded manpower as strategically significant mainly as it provided a reservoir of people to man a navy, a merchant marine, and the shore facilities that were necessary to service the ships and personnel afloat. He had no real concept (so far as I can discover) of the complex relationships of people in a modern industrial economy.

He discussed specifically what he called national character, by which he meant the customs and habits of a people and the relations of those habits and customs to national power. Here, again, he is disappointing. All his views seem to embrace is that certain habits and customs tend to dispose a people towards seafaring, commerce, and so on. Never did he seem to have much concept of morale, discipline, and other aspects of national character which we would regard as elementary and essential in any discussion of national power today.

His discussion of the character of government as one of the social factors in relation to national power is, likewise, it seems to me, defective and rudimentary by present-day standards. By the "character of government," Mahan meant to compare not merely the degree of popular control in a state but also the way in which the functioning of a given governmental system affects the state's ability to develop and sustain a strong maritime interest, an active foreign commerce, and a powerful navy. He made one point repeatedly: that democratic governments are notoriously improvident and generally unmilitaristic; that in a democracy it is very hard to sustain popular interest in the institutions of power necessary if the country is to maintain a strong military force on land or sea. His solution was to build up the pressure groups interested in main-

taining a navy. He said that if there is a strong merchant marine, a strong merchant marine interest behind it, a strong shipbuilding interest in the country, a strong organized interest of people who believe in the navy, and so on, then you would have pressures focussed upon the legislative body which would produce legislation that would tend in part to counteract what he regarded as the chronically improvident character of democracy.

I regret that time does not permit anything about the anachronistic character of Mahan's general thinking on economic policy patterns that support sea power. Almost all of his thinking on that subject comes right out of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. His hero was Colbert, the mercantilistic French Minister of Marine of the middle seventeenth century. Mahan never achieved much sophistication in the economic field and in consequence his economic thinking was a century behind times.

Now, in the light of this general sketch let me summarize some of Mahan's ideas regarding distribution of power in the world in his time, and his expectations as to the future distribution of power.

Mahan early concluded that no Eurasian mainland state could ever combine regionally dominant land power and globally dominant sea power. His argument was that if a state has even one vulnerable land frontier to defend by an army and fortifications, it would take so much of its energy and its resources that it would not be able to compete with states that were wholly insular. He later modified this conclusion in the light of a simultaneous development of German land and naval power in the 1900's. By 1910, he had come to the conclusion that perhaps Germany was going to be able to do this thing which in the 1890's he said could not be done — combine dominant land power with dominant sea power. He reconciled this with his earlier position by saying that Germany represented an extremely efficient form of state organization (we would say today that Germany approached the concept of a total-

itarian state although the Germany of that day was far from that destination) and that Germany's neighbors and potential enemies were either inefficient despotisms (a clear reference to Russia) or improvident democracies (by which he meant England and France).

This later view is significant because it reflects a significant change in Mahan's evaluations of geographical and non-geographical factors. In his earlier thinking, he was thinking largely in geographical-strategical terms; in his later thinking, he was thinking more in terms of social and political factors: state organization, improvident democracies, and so on. You will find that this is symptomatic, that, as Mahan grew older and more widely read and studied, he tended to broaden his concept of national power; to think less exclusively in terms of geography and strategical position and more in terms of the total framework of social organization.

Mahan early concluded that Great Britain could probably sustain her role as a globally dominant sea power and a power-balancer in Europe (this is Mahan of the 1890's). By 1910, he had revised this conclusion by expressing doubt that any single state could in the future maintain a globally dominant sea power, or, single-handed, play the role of power-balancer in Europe. By this time, he was talking more about the desirability of an Anglo-American joint control of the sea, which is very much in the pattern of our NATO thinking of the late 1940's and today, and similar to the line of thought which Mackinder eventually came to in his later years.

Mahan regarded the United States as possessing the latent capabilities necessary for global command of the sea. He especially emphasized our globally central position in terms of sea power. Now, this is a very significant point. Depending upon how one looks at communications, the United States' position on the globe is either central or peripheral. If one thinks primarily in terms of land communications, quite obviously Eurasia is the central po-

sition. But if one regards sea communications as the dominant factor, then North America becomes the central position. If air communications should ever become dominant, the geopolitical values of the grouping of lands and seas would have to be recalculated yet again. If one thinks in terms of railroads and highways, supplemented by airlines, then the central position would still appear to be Eurasia. But if one thinks globally in terms of sea communications supplemented by air communications, then the central position remains the United States.

It is interesting that the later Mackinder (not the early Mackinder) and Mahan all through his career emphasized the point that in terms of sea communications the United States has a globally central strategical position combined with continental insularity; that is to say, the United States has all the advantages of great area and — although Mahan didn't develop the point — highly diversified resources, in addition to a globally central position in terms of sea communications. He more or less recognized, however, that the United States lacked the strategic shore positions from which to operate naval power around the periphery of Eurasia and Africa; and it was upon such positions that British naval dominance heavily depended: The British Isles, Gibraltar, Malta, Suez, Cyprus, the Cape of Good Hope, Aden, Ceylon, Hong-Kong, Falkland Islands, Trinidad, Jamaica, etc. — wherever there was a bottleneck of commerce, the British had a naval base at or close to it.

Mahan recognized that the United States did not control these great trunk-line bottlenecks of commerce the way Great Britain did. That was why late in his life he kept saying that the qualities of the United States and Great Britain are complimentary; that if they could be joined together, they could resist any combination — much the line of thinking, as I said, that has gone into the formation of the Atlantic Alliance.

Mahan never deviated from the conclusion that Russia could be contained and harassed by sea power, but never could be mortally

hurt. This point is extensively developed in his book, *The Problem of Asia*, published in 1902, much of which sounds as though it were written yesterday. Sea power could get at Russia only in those regions where Russian land power approached the sea, such as the Turkish Straits, the Baltic, and the far eastern coast of Siberia. Mahan never deviated from the conclusion, moreover, that Russia could not itself become a serious contender for control of the sea except in the unlikely event (in his opinion) of successful Russian conquest of the marginal lands of Europe and Asia.

There was a point which he did not make that he could have made, and it is surprising that he did not make it. He wrote a great deal about the Russo-Japanese War of 1904 and about the Russian attempt to move a squadron from the Baltic to the Far East and the failure in the end to do so. The point that he did not make anywhere in clear-cut fashion was that Russia's sea frontiers were disconnected — the Far East, the Black Sea, the Baltic, and in the ice-bound Arctic, and that between every one of Russia's sea frontiers there was interposed some strategical position commanded by the British Navy — Singapore, Aden, the Cape of Good Hope, Suez Canal, Gibraltar, the British Isles, and so on. It would have strengthened his proposition had he made the point, but he did not make it.

Mahan displayed remarkable ambivalence with respect to Germany. As late as 1900, he regarded Germany as a natural ally of the insular states in a concerted policy of containing Russia. By 1910, he had become so alarmed by Germany's own military and naval development and oversea territorial ambitions that he urged the alignment of the insular and West European maritime states with Russia to contain Germany.

Moving now to Mackinder, it appears to me that the key variable in his theory was the alternating predominance of military force upon land and military force upon the oceans and connecting seas as a means of controlling the use of the seas. One of

the most common misconceptions about Mackinder is that his general proposition presented a dichotomy of land power versus sea power. But a careful reading of Mackinder's writings through a period from 1902 to 1943 reveals that he was interested in predominantly the same question as Mahan — the control of the seas. However, he approached it with a different set of propositions. His proposition was that in the past there had been an alternating control of the sea by the use of military force upon the land and military force upon the water. Once the whole shore line of the water area had come under the sovereignty of one state, then military force afloat became merely a police force. He cited for an example the case of the Indian Ocean which, by 1890, was virtually a British lake — all the way from Australia clear around to the Cape of Good Hope the shore line consisted of either British colonies or of territories which were dependent upon Britain or were allied with Britain. This was virtually a closed sea situation, such as prevailed in the Mediterranean after the defeat of Carthage by Rome. In that situation, military force upon the land controlled the sea (in Mackinder's thesis).

He went on to say that "the grouping of lands and seas, and of fertility and natural pathways" in conjunction with modern developments in overland communications pointed toward the eventual emergence of a single world-empire combining supreme global power both on land and on the water. His argument was that once the resources and land-power of Eurasia were consolidated under one political management and knit together by an effective grid of communication — such, for example, as was being developed in the 20th century through the railway systems of Europe and Asia — there would emerge such a powerful primary base — resources, manpower, and capital — that no combination of insular countries could stand against it.

Mackinder made much of the comparative productivity of the primary bases — that is, the home countries. He had an essentially modern, economically sophisticated concept of manpower

(which the economist would call "labor") plus resources (which the economist would call "land") plus equipment ("capital") plus organization ("management"). That is, in Mackinder's concept, manpower, resources, equipment, and organization (in the economic theory concept: labor, land, capital and management) produced productivity; and to compare the power of any two states, you needed to compare their productivity in terms of these factors.

The second condition of power, after comparative productivity of the primary base, was the security of the primary base. There, he made pretty much the same points as Mahan: the advantages of insularity, and so on.

Finally, his third condition of power was the strategical opportunities for bringing pressure or force to bear upon potential enemies from the territorial positions which one held. There his argument, again, was very much like Mahan's.

Mackinder's predictions of what was going to happen in world politics run about as follows: Eurasia-Africa, integrated by modern overland, rail, and other communications, were destined, in his view, to become the world's potentially most powerful and secure base of political power. In comparison to that, the insular states (including the United States) even in coalition could not compete. In 1919, he said: "If we take the long view, must we not still reckon with the possibility that a large part of the great Continent of Eurasia might some day be united under a single sway and that an invincible sea power might be based upon it?"

By 1943, Mackinder had retreated slightly from this dogmatic prediction and was admitting (at least, implicitly) that the insular powers in alliance with the Eurasian coast-land states might be able to balance this heartland Eurasian empire.

Karl Haushofer can be dismissed in a few words. He borrowed elements from Mahan, Mackinder, from a few other sources as well, added a few elements of his own, and set about showing Germany how to do the things which Mahan and Mackinder were

afraid Germany would do. Mackinder, in 1919, said to his government: "If you do not do certain things, Germany will become the dominant power of Eurasia." Haushofer in effect said: "It is a good idea; let's try it." Essentially, that is the contrast between Mackinder and Haushofer as I see it.

As time is running out, I will skip altogether the British geographer, Fairgrieve, who switched in mid-career from an essentially resources explanation of the distribution of national power (mainly in terms of energy resources) to a grouping-of-lands-and-seas hypothesis, patterned very much after Mackinder and Mahan.

I will also skip Nicholas Spykman who, if he had lived ten years more, might have made a very great contribution to geopolitical thinking in the United States. He died in 1943, when only 49 years old. I would say that Spykman's principal contribution was that he emphasized that the historical alignments of the last century and a half had not been the way Mackinder had pictured them. It had not been the sea powers or the maritime states against the Eurasian landlocked empire, but in each case had been some combination of the maritime states with the Eurasian landlocked empire against one of the other maritime states.

In the case of the Napoleonic Wars, it had been the insular state allied with the maritime states and Russia against France. In World Wars I and II, it had been the insular states of Great Britain and the United States with most of the maritime states of Europe plus the heartland state against Germany. His general proposition was that the crucial area was not the heartland, or the interior of Eurasia, but the coastland where the great population and the great industrial complexes were located, and that whoever controlled these coastlands (he called them "the rimlands") of Europe and Asia — particularly, Europe — would be in a position to exercise world power. This, again, you see is very close to the basic philosophy of the Atlantic Alliance.

I can make only a brief general statement of the theory that national power varies with the distribution of resources. The geologist, C. K. Leith, has developed an hypothesis on that basis. Brooks Emeny, formerly President of the Foreign Policy Association, published a book on the same theme. The British geographer, James Fairgrieve, announced such a theory. Perhaps the most interesting statement of this theory comes from an anonymous document that was prepared in Washington during the period of the war (in the middle 1940's). This was circulated to a limited group within the government and to a few outsiders in a mimeographed form (a big document of several hundred pages).

In this document we read :

“Energy is the substance of a nation’s strength and the measure of its influence on its neighbors. In international relations, energy is fuel, is power. Thus, national power is determined largely by the amount of energy that can be turned into productive activity. If enough is available, the nation can provide for itself without recourse to war. And if war comes, a nation can defend itself. The nation lacking in energy resources, however, can neither provide for itself in peace nor defend itself in war. The capacity for peace and the capacity for war are thus measured to a large degree by the volume of energy resources within the country. International relations are patterned by differences in the quantities of energy available from country to country.”

That is energy-determinism, pure and simple.

The final group of theories is the one typified by the little article on “Temperature Dominance Over Human Life,” by Clar-

ence Mills, published in *Science Magazine*, September, 1949. Mills' argument runs about as follows: The human body is an internal combustion engine of rather low efficiency. For every calory of heat utilized, several must be dissipated into the air by radiation, conduction, evaporation, or other means. High temperatures, especially when coupled with high humidity, may make dissipation of waste heat more or less difficult. The human organism responds to high temperatures and high humidity by slowing its metabolism rate and this retarded metabolism is reflected in lower mental, as well as physical, activity.

The earth, he says, is currently in a warming-up phase of a long-term climatic cycle. Conditions in the tropics will become more unfavorable even than they are today and the stimulating climate of northeastern and north-central United States is deteriorating, while the climate of the U.S.S.R., far to the north (Baku, in southern Russia, is in the same latitude as Long Island) is growing more favorable, warming up, becoming much more stimulating.

I would simply say, by way of criticism, that the evidence of the long-term climatic trend is not yet definitely established. The meteorologists still disagree as to the long-term trend. The hypothesis regarding the relationship between human energy and climate has been challenged by very respectable students — biologists, geographers, and so on. The counter-argument is that the capacity of the human organism to adapt itself to different climatic conditions by adaptation of clothing, diet, and so on, is very much greater than Mills and Huntington were willing to admit. Mills has not established that climatic variations — even if his laboratory experience with experimental animals is sound — is so much more controlling than other factors as to outweigh all the others. He isolates this one variable and treats it as the determinant. He neglects the question of resources, he neglects the question of geographical position, he neglects a great many other factors, and says that this one factor is so much more important than all the rest that the rest do not matter.

Mills also assumes a relatively static technology with respect to air conditioning, clothing development, clothing customs, nutrition, and other fields. Every one of these impinges upon and affects the impact of climate upon human behavior.

Rather than take up valuable time with a summary of conclusions, perhaps it would be better to take our intermission and then come back and seek the flaws in my arguments.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Dr. Harold Sprout

Professor Sprout was born in Benzonia, Michigan, on 14 March 1901. He was graduated from Oberlin College in 1924 with A.B. and A.M. degrees. In 1924-25 he studied at the University of Wisconsin Law School and at the Western Reserve University Law School in 1925-26. He was a Carnegie Fellow in International Law in 1928-29 and was granted a Ph.D. degree from the University of Wisconsin in 1929.

Dr. Sprout was Assistant Professor of Government at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, in 1926-27, and Assistant Professor of Political Science at Stanford University in 1929-31. Since 1931 he has been in the Department of Politics at Princeton University, advancing from the rank of instructor to full professorship in 1945. He has been Chairman of the department since 1949.

Professor Sprout has been in demand as a visiting professor or lecturer and has served in these capacities at Columbia University, University of Denver, University of Pennsylvania, the Army War College, the U.S. Naval Academy, the U.S. Military Academy, and the National War College. During World War II, he served successively as a consultant for the Office of War Information, the War Department, Department of State, and the Navy Department.

He is co-author with Margaret Sprout, his wife, of: "The Rise of American Naval Power," (revised edition), 1943; "Toward a New Order of Sea Power," (revised edition), 1943; "Foundations of National Power," 1945, revised 1951. He is a member of numerous professional and educational organizations and has been a prolific contributor of articles on American foreign policy and defense policy to various journals.