

MAKING THE STRANGE FAMILIAR: GEOGRAPHICAL ANALOGY IN GLOBAL GEOPOLITICS*

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ABSTRACT. In several publications in the 1950s, Donald Meinig raised two themes that are central to contemporary “critical geopolitics”: criticizing the idea of a determining global physical geography that directs global geopolitics, and suggesting that geographical labels and geopolitical concepts have political consequences. I take off from Meinig’s insight about geopolitics as an active process of naming and acting by discussing the broad power of analogy in world politics and by examining recent use of two geographical analogies—the Macedonian syndrome and balkanization—as symptomatic of a wider process of making the strange familiar by recycling geographical analogies. *Keywords:* balkanization, geopolitics, Macedonian syndrome, D. W. Meinig.

I tell you, captain, if you look in the maps of the world, I warrant you shall find, in the comparisons between Macedon and Monmouth, that the situations, look you, is both alike. There is a river in Macedon; and there is also moreover a river at Monmouth: it is call’d Wye at Monmouth; but it is out of my prains what is the name of the other river; but ’tis all one, ’tis alike as my fingers is to my fingers, and there is salmons in both.

—William Shakespeare, [1599] 1906

Early in his academic career, Donald Meinig published an article and several book reviews about global geopolitics (1953, 1956, 1957). Although I would not contend that these have a great deal to do directly with much of what he wrote later on the historical geography of North America, they do have some relevance to recent writing on global geopolitics; specifically, that which advertises itself as “critical.” They also speak more generally to Meinig’s critical intellect as a scholar whose early writing on geopolitics has never received the attention it deserves. From this viewpoint, Meinig’s writing on geopolitics from the mid-1950s offers an interesting starting point both for reevaluating that time as a uniformly “barren” period in the history of geopolitical thinking and for responding to contemporary anxieties about how global geopolitics is best construed (Agnew 2002, 85–135). In this article I am primarily concerned with the latter.

In the publications in question, Meinig displayed two characteristics that are fundamental to today’s “critical geopolitics” but that were entirely lacking in most conceptions of geopolitics during the period in which he was writing: exposing the fallacy of a timeless physical geography that directs world politics and arguing that the geographical labels often innocently introduced into geopolitical analysis

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