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MAPPING THE COLD WAR

Cartography and the Framing of America's International Power

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INTRODUCTION

The Rhetorical Lives of Cold War Maps

> In the leading machine, the Head of the Air Force was sitting beside the pilot. He had a world atlas on his knees and he kept staring first at the atlas, then at the ground below, trying to figure out where they were going. Frantically he turned the pages of the atlas. . . . In the seat behind him sat the Head of the Army who was even more terrified.
>
> "You don't mean to tell me we've gone right out of the atlas?" he cried, leaning forward to look.
>
> "That's exactly what I *am* telling you!" cried the Air Force man. "Look for yourself. Here's the very last map in the whole flaming atlas! We went off that over an hour ago!" He turned the page. As in all atlases, there were two completely blank pages at the very end. "So now we must be somewhere here," he said, putting a finger on one of the blank pages.
>
> "Where's here?" cried the Head of the Army.
>
> The young pilot was grinning broadly. He said to them, "That's why they always put two blank pages at the back of the atlas. They're for new countries. You're meant to fill them in yourself."
>
> —Roald Dahl, *The BFG*

In his classic children's book *The BFG,* Roald Dahl expresses a fundamental cartographic conundrum that cuts deeply into the anxieties and opportunities of charting political space.[1] On the one hand, the army and air force experts are anxious that their trusted map no longer reflects the land below—the uncharted space on the ground is empty white blankness on the atlas. At the same time, the pilot smiles with the acknowledgment that the space beneath them is something that is not a *given,* but has to be actively *written.* In a sense, Dahl reveals the essential tensions around the legibility of space through maps: the map is often taken for granted as a representation of what *is*, but once its function as a constructed image is acknowledged, a nervous loss of control is created—a feeling of "flying off the atlas."[2] Those with the power (and vision) to fill in the blank pages are presented with a momentous opportunity to write the world.

When the head of the army asks, "Where's here?" in *The BFG*, he may as well be speaking to the United States' struggle with its own cartographic conundrum throughout the second half of the twentieth century. By the dawn of the Cold War, world space had in many respects become closed—most of the nooks and crannies across the globe were accounted for, organized and classified with lines and borders.[3] Simultaneously, American power underwent massive spatial transformations, with U.S. elites and leaders enjoying an increasingly higher bird's-eye view of international space, while perceiving that they had the immense responsibility of being the writer of that space.[4] Moving from a worldview marked by traditional balances of power and hemispheric boundaries toward a more fluid, abstract, and above all modern internationalism, the United States faced a world that seemed both tantalizingly and alarmingly closer.[5] Cultural critic John Berger once wrote: "Our vision is continually active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are. . . . Every image embodies a way of seeing."[6] Like the pilot's view in Dahl's airplane crisscrossing over wide expanses of territory, the perspective of the cartographer often frames the world from a vantage point outside of the space itself, thus giving them (and their users and readers) a position of power—an encouragement to see terrain as abstract, able to be shaped, flattened, and simplified.[7] The very materials (like maps) through which Americans envisioned their nation helped constitute a sense of national identity and served as a visual guide for interpreting the scope of U.S. power in the world.

A fitting illustration of the stakes of cartography for Americans during the Cold War comes, perhaps ironically, as that very war was falling apart: on December 2 and 3, 1989, during an eventful season of protests across Eastern Europe, Presidents Mikhail Gorbachev and George H. W. Bush held a summit at Malta.[8] Alan K. Henrikson recounts a particularly tense exchange between the two leaders:

> Gorbachev handed President George Bush a blue-and-white map allegedly showing the Soviet Union's encirclement by US bases as well as American aircraft carriers and battleships. . . . President Bush was at a loss for words. President Gorbachev then said tartly: "I notice that you seem to have no response." Bush, in response, pointed out to Gorbachev that the Soviet landmass was shown on the map as a giant,

> white, empty space, with no indication of the vast military complex that US forces were intended to deter. "Maybe you'd like me to fill in the blanks on this," he said. "I'll get the CIA to do a map of how things look to us. Then we'll compare and see whose is more accurate."[9]

This curt exchange between two superpowers encapsulates the contentious lines and boundaries of mapping.[10] Maps are ideological blueprints—they frame the language of politics in a melding of signs and symbols that both reflect and create colorful and charged worldviews. And as the two cold warriors knew well, maps communicate volumes not just in what they include but also in what geographer J. B. Harley called the "silences," or what maps choose to omit and obscure from view.[11] Bush and Gorbachev understood the map as a medium of control, but they also feared what the map did not tell them—a reminder of what they *cannot* know or control.[12] This power places cartography in a dynamic of revealing and concealing—a reductive, selective, and partial process where what is not mapped often becomes just as salient as what is lined and bounded on the page.[13]

The map scuffle at Malta, though, is not merely a tidy example of how cartography is used by powerful states; it represents well just how important historical context is in shaping our visions of the world. The Bush-Gorbachev exchange was, no doubt, borne out of the very particular spatial framework created and sustained by the Cold War. As late as December 1989, Bush and Gorbachev were still committed to the clearly bounded Cold War system, typified by bipolar intelligence maps that contained bases and battleships. As walls toppled, countries reunited, and borders ripped open, two influential world leaders still clung to the familiar cartographic shapes of their forty-five-year rivalry. Important questions then follow: How did such Cold War worldviews become so powerful and so entrenched through the flat, two-dimensional planes of maps? What about the map makes it uniquely suited to encapsulating the Cold War? In Dahl's terms, how were the blank pages of the atlas of the Cold War filled?

These questions form the basis of *Mapping the Cold War.* When the United States emerged from World War II as an undeniably global force, the country faced numerous decisions about where to direct its power across the world, and how to represent itself and its values in this new framework. The Cold War was an inescapably spatial conflict—from the post–World War II carving of the global landscape into spheres of influence right up until the Cold War vision of the world was challenged in the streets of Prague and Berlin. Maps, in many ways, are the archetypal artifacts of the Cold War. They, more than any other medium, represent the fundamental discursive and historical tensions that strategists, academics, and citizens negotiated throughout the whole of the conflict. As John Pickles writes, "If cartography is a form of discourse . . . then the cartographer and the map are at the centre of debates over technocracy and power in the modern world."[14] And there has never been, perhaps, a more contentious, rancorous, and epic debate around modern technocracy and power than the one in which the United States found itself during the Cold War. In the eventful second act of the so-called American Century, where and how America chose to place itself on the map, in reference to the rest of the world, was a powerful, political act—an attempt to obtain a sense of stability amid a complex and constantly changing globe.[15] Maps offered particular choices on how to depict missile silos and peace agreements; how small or large to portray the developing countries of the world; where to intervene; whom to fear; and whom to contain. They dramatized just how close our allies and adversaries were. These choices all had important consequences—they spoke to what kinds of values Americans possessed during the Cold War by mapping our place in the world vis-à-vis the international arena.

In *Mapping the Cold War*, I explore how cartography has powerfully positioned American identity in unique and particular ways. Specifically, I argue that maps articulated America's sense of its power in the Cold War by projecting crucial relationships between the tensions of art and science, space and place, and strategy and ideology. By acting as media of American power, maps offered important definitions of ownership, knowledge, containment, commitment, control, and even resistance that framed our perspectives of the Cold War. Maps *located* these central ideological tensions between American national interests and America's international aspirations. Their borders, scales, projections, and other conventions both prescribed and constrained the ways in which foreign policy elites, popular audiences, and social activists negotiated such tensions in a world of expanding alliances and explosive conflicts.[16] A distinctly modern internationalism had been taking root for decades leading up to the Cold War, the implications of which found their way into the very visualization of American power and global strategy.[17] Lester Olson, Cara Finnegan, and Diane Hope have defined visual culture as the "historically situated beliefs about vision and images that influence audiences' practices of looking."[18] Understanding the historical contingency of how maps were created and used in a conflict as wide and complex as the Cold War, I believe, is an important part of the modern history of the United States and provides an opportunity to accentuate its core spatial values.[19]