

**United States History and Government**  
**Content-Specific Rubric**  
**Thematic Essay—January 2007**

**Theme: Influence of Geographic Factors on Governmental Actions**

Actions taken by the United States government have often been influenced by geographic factors. Some of these factors include location, climate, natural resources, and physical features.

**Task:** Identify *two* actions taken by the United States government that have been influenced by geographic factors and for *each*

- State *one* reason the United States took the action
- Describe how a geographic factor influenced the action
- Discuss the impact of the action on the United States

You may use any action taken by the United States government that was influenced by a geographic factor. Some suggestions you might wish to consider include the Lewis and Clark expedition (1804-1806), issuance of the Monroe Doctrine (1823), Mexican War (1846-1848), Commodore Perry's opening of Japan (1853), passage of the Homestead Act (1862), purchase of Alaska (1867), construction of the Panama Canal (1904-1914), entry into World War II (1941), passage of the Interstate Highway Act (1956), and involvement in the Persian Gulf War (1991).

**Scoring Notes:**

1. This thematic essay has a minimum of *six* components (*one* reason for *two* actions taken by the United States government, how geographic factors influenced these *two* actions, and the impact of these *two* actions on the United States).
2. A response may combine the influence of the geographic factor with the reason for the action taken by the United States. Likewise, a response may incorporate the influence of the geographic factor into the discussion of the impact of the action.
3. Immediate or long-term impacts of the actions taken by the United States government may be discussed.
4. The same geographic factor may be used to discuss both actions, e.g., strategic location could be used in a discussion of the Monroe Doctrine and in a discussion of the building of the Panama Canal.

**Score of 5:**

- Thoroughly develops *all* aspects of the task in depth by identifying *two* actions taken by the United States government that were influenced by geographic factors, stating a reason the United States took each action, describing how a geographic factor influenced each action, and discussing the impact of each action on the United States
- Is more analytical than descriptive (analyzes, evaluates, and/or creates information), e.g., *Lewis and Clark expedition*: Jefferson justified the purchase of Louisiana with his dream for an “empire of liberty”; added to knowledge of the territory by studying native cultures and performing scientific studies; opened the way for western settlement and strengthened claims to Oregon; showed transcontinental journeys were possible; *construction of the Panama Canal*: although building the canal through Panama was the ideal geographic location, getting the rights to build a canal was the great challenge; due to its location and size, the isthmus of Panama was a wise choice to place a canal for international use
- Richly supports the theme with relevant facts, examples, and details, e.g., *Lewis and Clark expedition*: President Jefferson in one bold move had doubled the size of the United States; United States wanted to control trade on the Mississippi River by controlling the port of New Orleans; Lewis and Clark kept extensive journals; *construction of the Panama Canal*: sea route prior to the canal was around the tip of South America through treacherous waters and storms; the United States supported the Panamanians’ revolt against Colombian rule
- Demonstrates a logical and clear plan of organization; includes an introduction and a conclusion that are beyond a restatement of the theme

**Score of 4:**

- Develops **all** aspects of the task but may do so unevenly by discussing all aspects for one action more thoroughly than for a second action *or* by discussing some aspects of the task for both actions more thoroughly than other aspects
- Is both descriptive and analytical (applies, analyzes, evaluates, and/or creates information), e.g., *issuance of the Monroe Doctrine*: the protection of Latin America was important to the United States because of Latin America's close proximity; President Monroe knew that the Monroe Doctrine would be effective because of the implicit backing of the British navy; *Mexican War*: the United States wanted lands west of Texas and winning a war with Mexico was one means of achieving that goal; the Mexican Cession would cause sectional controversy over slavery and popular sovereignty
- Supports the theme with relevant facts, examples, and details
- Demonstrates a logical and clear plan of organization; includes an introduction and a conclusion that are beyond a restatement of the theme

**Score of 3:**

- Develops **all** aspects of the task with little depth *or* develops **at least four** aspects of the task in some depth
- Is more descriptive than analytical (apply, may analyze, and/or evaluates information)
- Includes some relevant facts, examples, and details; may include some minor inaccuracies
- Demonstrates a satisfactory plan of organization; includes an introduction and a conclusion that may be a restatement of the theme

**Note:** If **all** aspects of the task for **one** action have been thoroughly developed in depth and if the response meets most of the other Level 5 criteria, the overall response may be a Level 3 paper.

**Score of 2:**

- Minimally develops **all** aspects of the task *or* develops **at least three** aspects of the task in some depth
- Is primarily descriptive; may include faulty, weak, or isolated application or analysis
- Includes few relevant facts, examples, and details; may include some inaccuracies
- Demonstrates a general plan of organization; may lack focus; may contain digressions; may not clearly identify which aspect of the task is being addressed; may lack an introduction and/or a conclusion

**Score of 1:**

- Minimally develops some aspects of the task
- Is descriptive; may lack understanding, application, or analysis
- Includes few relevant facts, examples, or details; may include inaccuracies
- May demonstrate a weakness in organization; may lack focus; may contain digressions; may not clearly identify which aspect of the task is being addressed; may lack an introduction and/or a conclusion

**Score of 0:**

Fails to develop the task or may only refer to the theme in a general way; *OR* includes no relevant facts, examples, or details; *OR* includes only the theme, task, or suggestions as copied from the test booklet; *OR* is illegible; *OR* is a blank paper

Geography has been an influence on the United States in many of its major decisions. There are two that stand out namely the Monroe Doctrine, issued in 1823, and the Mexican American War fought from 1846 to 1848. Being close neighbors with Latin America, the United States had the means and interests to protect it. The United States emphasis on Manifest Destiny also inclined it to go to war for territorial gain.

The Monroe Doctrine was a foreign policy statement passed by Secretary of State John Quincy Adams during the Monroe Presidency. Recognizing a threat from Europe on the development and integrity of Latin America, the United States declared that further colonization in the Western Hemisphere would be seen as a militant action and that the US would defend Latin America from foreign invaders. The protection of Latin America was important to the United States as it was close geographically and the recolonization by European powers in Latin America could threaten the United States' ability to expand and trade effectively in the region.

The fact that Europe was across the Atlantic Ocean was also important. Colonization of the Western Hemisphere would require use of the sea, which was largely controlled by the British naval fleet. Great Britain supported the protection of Latin America as long as existing colonies were allowed to remain. In fact, the nation proposed that it and the United States should issue a joint statement, but not wanting to risk political unity of the US and Britain in the eyes of the world, Monroe declined, and instead passed a unilateral doctrine. He knew that with the implicit

backing of the British fleet, Europe could do no more than ~~hawk~~ at the Monroe Doctrine.

With the United States only controlling a portion of North America, European expansion threatened that of the United States. Dispute over the Oregon territory had already proved apparent as Russia, Britain, Spain, and the United States all staked a claim to it. Spain gave up its claim in the Adams-Onís Treaty and Russia (<sup>hereafter</sup> ~~thereafter~~), so <sup>contention</sup> ~~(contention)~~ was mainly between the US and Britain. Without the territories of California and only lands bordering the United States, Monroe feared European intervention in Mexican lands as well.

The success of the Monroe Doctrine assured American dominance of Latin American trade and often, policy. The Monroe Doctrine and later, the Roosevelt Corollary allowed the United States to intervene in Cuba during the Spanish-American War and serve as a fault facilitator in Latin American disputes. Some Americans even became inspired to colonize the region shown in the Ostend Manifesto, a plan under Taylor to colonize Cuba, and the Walker Expedition, in which Nicaragua was briefly controlled by an American-born John Walker.

The Mexican-American War was also influenced by geography. The conflict stemmed from the claim of the Mexican government that its border ~~with~~ with Texas was at the Nueces River, while the US claimed the Rio Grande to be the true boundary. Pres. James K. Polk sent John Slidell to settle the matter, and then sent troops under the command of Taylor into the disputed

region after Slidell failed. Although officially US declaration of War was a result of firing upon the US troops, the prevailing feeling of Manifest Destiny in the US was probably the true reason. "Doves" called for "spot resolutions," as they doubted US troops were met beyond the Rio Grande River and had not provoked attack. Doves were quickly dismissed by the pro-war Hawks under the lead of President Polk, and they passed a declaration of war in Congress.

The United States was geographically "incomplete" and during the war, Polk sent out troops to decisively take over the land of California as well as present day New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, and other western states. The US-Mexican land boundary allowed for an easy campaign against the nation.

The war ended with the passage of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. It granted the US lands known as the "Mexican cession," which consisted of California and two other large territories - Utah and New Mexico. The Mexican-Texas border was set at the Rio Grande and the US needed only to pay \$20 million to Mexico. The impact of this was far more than territorial gain. The Mexican Cession would cause sectional controversy over slavery and popular sovereignty. They also allowed for the building of a transcontinental railroad after the Gadsden Purchase.

In conclusion, geography affected US foreign policy.