

Geography of the United States

Area

By total area (water as well as land), the United States is either slightly larger or smaller than the People's Republic of China, making it the world's third or fourth largest country. China and the United States are smaller than Russia and Canada in total area, but are larger than Brazil. By land area only (exclusive of waters), the United States is the world's third largest country, after Russia and China, with Canada in fourth. Whether the US or China is the third largest country by total area depends on two factors: (1) The validity of China's claim on Aksai Chin and Trans-Karakoram Tract. Both these territories are also claimed by India, so are not counted; and (2) How US calculates its own surface area.

General characteristics

The United States shares land borders with Canada (to the north) and Mexico (to the south), and a territorial water border with Russia in the northwest, and two territorial water borders in the southeast between Florida and Cuba, and Florida and the Bahamas. The contiguous forty-eight states are otherwise bounded by the Pacific Ocean on the west, the Atlantic Ocean on the east, and the Gulf of Mexico to the southeast.

Forty-eight of the states are in the single region between Canada and Mexico; this group is referred to, with varying precision and formality, as the *continental* or *contiguous United States*, and as the *Lower 48*. Alaska, which is not included in the term *contiguous United States*, is at the northwestern end of North America, separated from the Lower 48 by Canada.

The capital city, Washington, District of Columbia, is a federal district located on land donated by the state of Maryland (Virginia had also donated land, but it was returned in 1849). The United States also has overseas territories with varying levels of independence and organization: in the Caribbean the territories of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, and in the Pacific the inhabited territories of Guam, American Samoa, and the Northern Mariana Islands, along with a number of uninhabited island territories.

Physiographic Divisions

The eastern United States has a varied topography. A broad, flat coastal plain lines the Atlantic and Gulf shores from the Texas-Mexico border to New York City, and includes the Florida peninsula. Areas further inland feature rolling hills and temperate forests. The Appalachian Mountains form a line of low mountains separating the eastern seaboard from the Great Lakes and the Mississippi Basin.

The five Great Lakes are located in the north-central portion of the country, four of them forming part of the border with Canada, only Lake Michigan situated entirely within United States. The southeast United States contain subtropical forests and mangrove wetlands in Florida. West of the Appalachians lies the Mississippi River basin and two large eastern tributaries, the Ohio River and the Tennessee River. The Ohio and Tennessee Valleys and the Midwest consist largely of rolling hills and productive farmland, stretching south to the Gulf Coast.

The Great Plains lie west of the Mississippi River and east of the Rocky Mountains. A large portion of the country's agricultural products are grown in the Great Plains. Before their general conversion to farmland, the Great Plains were noted for their extensive grasslands, from tall grass prairie in the eastern plains to short grass steppe in the western High Plains.

The Great Plains come to an abrupt end at the Rocky Mountains. The Rocky Mountains form a large portion of the Western U.S., entering from Canada and stretching nearly to Mexico. The Rocky Mountain region is the highest region of the United States by average elevation. The highest peaks of the Rockies are found in Colorado, the tallest peak being Mount Elbert at 14,440 ft (4,400 m). The Rocky Mountains contain some of the most spectacular and well known scenery in the world. In addition, instead of being one generally continuous and solid mountain range, it is broken up into a number of smaller, intermittent mountain ranges, forming a large series of basins and valleys.

West of the Rocky Mountains lies the Intermountain Plateaus (also known as the Intermountain West), a large, arid desert lying between the Rockies and the Cascades and Sierra Nevada ranges. The Southwest is predominantly a low-lying desert region. A portion known as the Colorado Plateau is considered to have some of the most spectacular scenery in the world. Other smaller Intermountain areas include the Columbia Plateau covering eastern Washington, western Idaho and northeast Oregon and the Snake River Plain in Southern Idaho.

The Intermountain Plateaus come to an end at the Cascade Range and the Sierra Nevada. The Cascades consist of largely intermittent, volcanic mountains, many rising prominently from the surrounding landscape. The Sierra Nevada, further south, is a high, rugged, and dense mountain range. It contains the highest point in the contiguous 48 states, Mount Whitney (14,505 ft or 4,421 m).

These areas contain some spectacular scenery as well. West of the Cascades and Sierra Nevada is a series of valleys, such as the Central Valley in California and the Willamette Valley in Oregon. Along the coast

is a series of low mountain ranges known as the Pacific Coast Ranges. Much of the Pacific Northwest coast is inhabited by some of the densest vegetation outside of the Tropics, and also the tallest trees in the world (the Redwoods).

Alaska contains some of the most dramatic and untapped scenery in the country. Tall, prominent mountain ranges rise up sharply from broad, flat plains. On the islands off the south and southwest coast are many volcanoes. Hawaii, far to the south of Alaska in the Pacific Ocean, is a chain of tropical, volcanic islands, popular as a tourist destination for many from East Asia and the mainland United States.

The territories of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands encompass a number of tropical isles in the northeastern Caribbean Sea. In the Pacific Ocean the territories of Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands occupy the limestone and volcanic isles of the Mariana archipelago, and American Samoa (the only populated US territory in the southern hemisphere) encompasses volcanic peaks and coral atolls in the eastern part of the Samoan Islands chain.

Climate

Due to its large size and wide range of geographic features, the United States contains examples of nearly every global climate. The climate is temperate in most areas, subtropical in the Southern United States, tropical in Hawaii and southern Florida, polar in Alaska, semiarid in the Great Plains, Mediterranean in coastal California and arid in the Great Basin. Its comparatively favorable agricultural climate contributed (in part) to the country's rise as a world power, with infrequent severe drought in the major agricultural regions, a general lack of widespread flooding, and a mainly temperate climate that receives adequate precipitation.

The Great Basin and Columbia Plateau (the Intermountain Plateaus) are arid or semiarid regions. The Southwest is a hot desert, with temperatures exceeding 100 °F (37.8 °C) for several weeks at a time in summer. The Southwest and the Great Basin are also affected by the monsoon from the Gulf of California from July to September, which brings localized but often severe thunderstorms to the region.

Much of California consists of a Mediterranean climate, with sometimes excessive rainfall from October–April and nearly no rain the rest of the year. In the Pacific Northwest rain falls year-round, but is much heavier during winter and spring. The mountains of the west receive abundant precipitation and very heavy snowfall. The Cascades are one of the snowiest places in the world, with some places averaging over 600 inches (1,524 cm) of snow annually, but the lower elevations closer to the coast receive very little snow.

Florida has a subtropical climate in the northern and central part of the state and a tropical climate in the far southern part of the state. Summers are wet and winters are dry in Florida. Annually much of central and southern Florida are frost-free. The mild winters of Florida allow a massive citrus industry to thrive in the central part of the state, and Florida is second to only Brazil in citrus production in the world.

Extremes

In northern Alaska, arctic conditions predominate, and the temperature has fallen as low as -80°F (-62.2°C). On the other end of the spectrum, Death Valley, California once reached 134°F (56.7°C), the highest temperature ever recorded on Earth.

On average, the mountains of the western states receive the highest levels of snowfall on Earth. The greatest annual snowfall level is at Mount Rainier in Washington, at 692 inches (1,758 cm); the record there was 1,122 inches (2,850 cm) in the winter of 1971–72.

In the east, while snowfall does not approach western levels, the region near the Great Lakes and the mountains of the Northeast receive the most. Along the northwestern Pacific coast, rainfall is greater than anywhere else in the continental U.S., with Quinault Rainforest in Washington having an average of 137 inches (348 cm).

In central portions of the U.S., tornadoes are more common than anywhere else on Earth and touch down most commonly in the spring and summer. Deadly and destructive hurricanes occur almost every year along the Atlantic seaboard and the Gulf of Mexico. The Appalachian region and the Midwest experience the worst floods, though virtually no area in the U.S. is immune to flooding. The Southwest has the worst droughts; one is thought to have lasted over 500 years and to have hurt Ancestral Pueblo peoples. The West is affected by large wildfires each year.

Natural Disasters

The United States is affected by a variety of natural disasters yearly. Although drought is rare, it has occasionally caused major disruption, such as during the Dust Bowl (1931–1942). Farmland failed throughout the Plains, entire regions were virtually depopulated, and dust storms ravaged the land.

Tornadoes and Hurricanes

The Great Plains and Midwest, due to the contrasting air masses, sees frequent severe thunderstorms and tornado outbreaks during spring and summer with around 1,000 tornadoes occurring each year. The strip of land from north Texas north to Kansas and Nebraska and east into Tennessee is known as Tornado Alley, where many houses have tornado shelters and many towns have tornado sirens.

Hurricanes are another natural disaster found in the US, which can hit anywhere along the Gulf Coast or the Atlantic Coast as well as Hawaii in the Pacific Ocean. Hurricane season runs from June 1 to November 30, with a peak from mid-August through early October. Some of the more devastating hurricanes have included the Galveston Hurricane of 1900, Hurricane Andrew in 1992, and Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The remnants of tropical cyclones from the Eastern Pacific also occasionally impact the western United States, bringing moderate to heavy rainfall.

Flooding

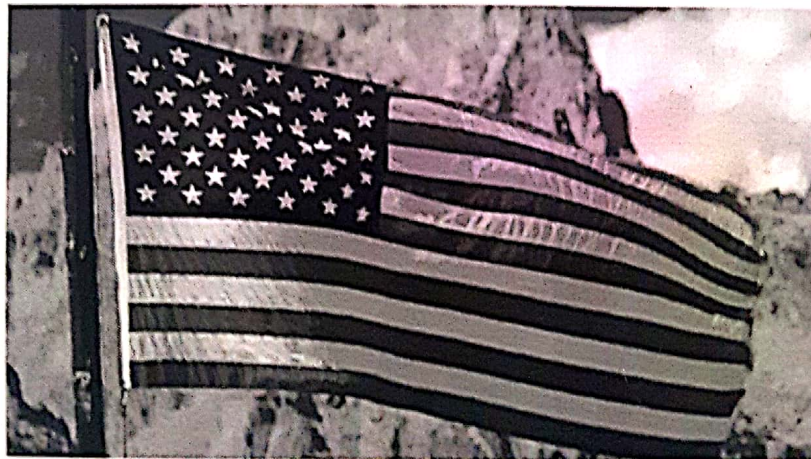
Occasional severe flooding is experienced. There was the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, the Great Flood of 1993, and widespread flooding and mudslides. Localized flooding can, however, occur anywhere, and mudslides from heavy rain can cause problems in any mountainous area, particularly the Southwest.

Volcanoes and Earthquakes

The American Northwest sees the highest concentration of active volcanoes in the United States, in Washington, Oregon and northern California along the Cascade Mountains. There are several active volcanoes located in the islands of Hawaii, including Kilauea in ongoing eruption since 1983, but they do not typically affect the inhabitants of the islands. There has not been a major life-threatening eruption on the Hawaiian islands since the 17th century. Volcanic eruptions can occasionally be devastating, such as in the 1980 eruption of Mount St. Helens in Washington.

Earthquakes can cause extensive damage, such as the 1906 San Francisco earthquake or the 1964 Good Friday earthquake near Anchorage, Alaska. California is well known for seismic activity, and requires large structures to be earthquake resistant to minimize loss of life and property. Outside of devastating earthquakes, California experiences minor earthquakes on a regular basis.

The American Flag



- The American flag is an important symbol of the United States.
- The flag has 13 red and white stripes.
- The stripes represent the 13 original colonies.
- There are 50 stars on the flag.
- Each star represents a state.
- The American national anthem is about the American flag.
- The name of the national anthem is "The Star-Spangled Banner."
- The Star-Spangled Banner was written in 1814.

The Statue of Liberty

The Statue of Liberty is a famous symbol of the United States.

The Statue of Liberty is in New York Harbor on Liberty Island.

In 1886, France gave the statue to the United States.

It was a symbol of friendship between France and the United States.

Millions of immigrants saw the statue when they arrived in America.

Today, the Statue of Liberty is a symbol of freedom and democracy.

National U.S. Holidays

There are ten national U.S. holidays.

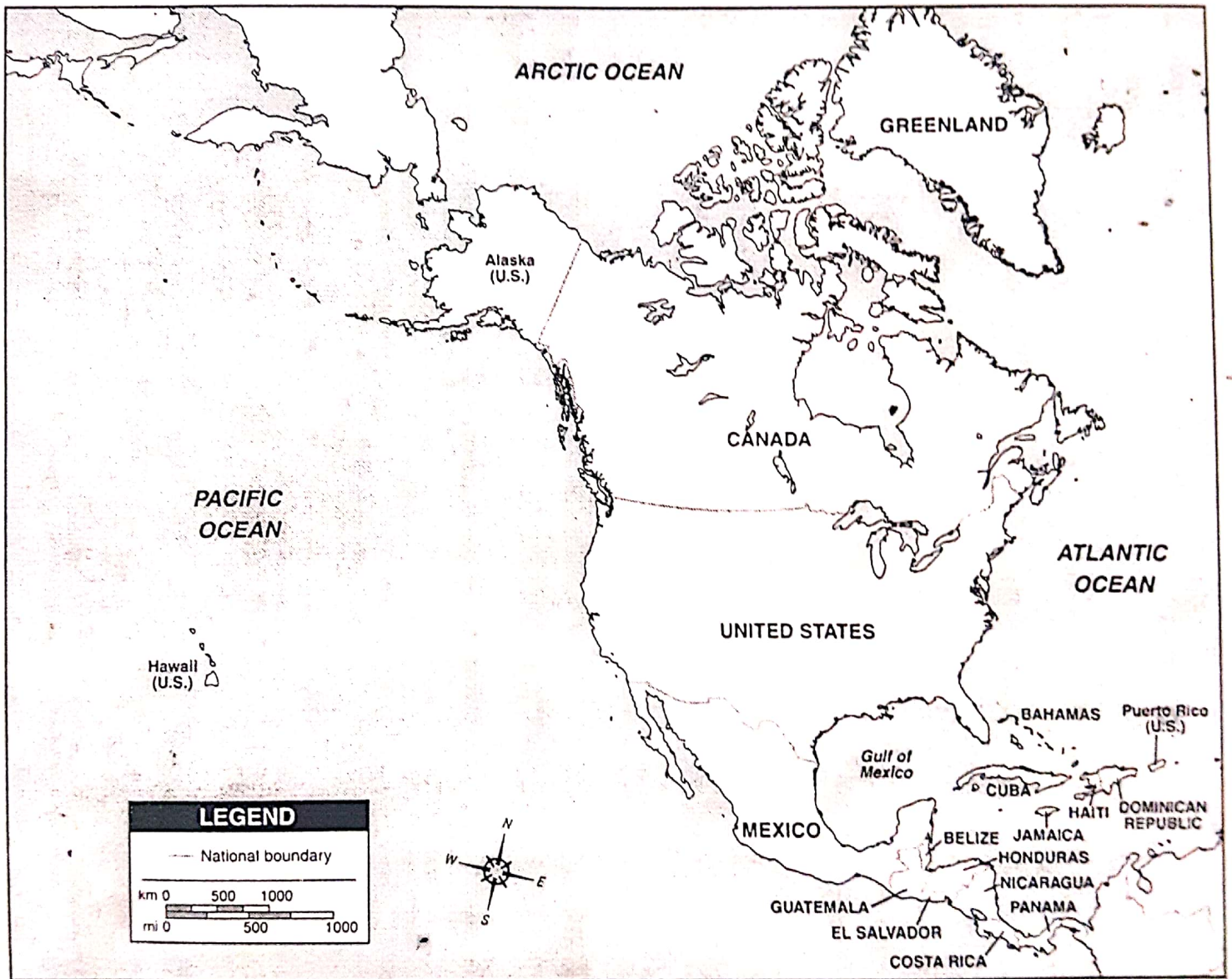
On these holidays, many people do not work.

Most banks, schools, and government offices are closed on national holidays.

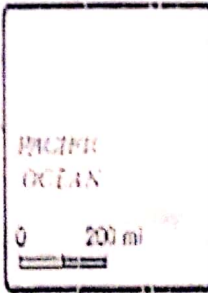
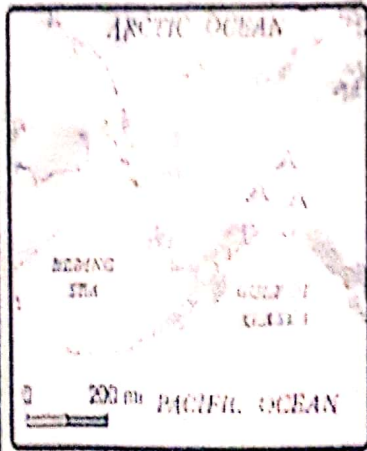
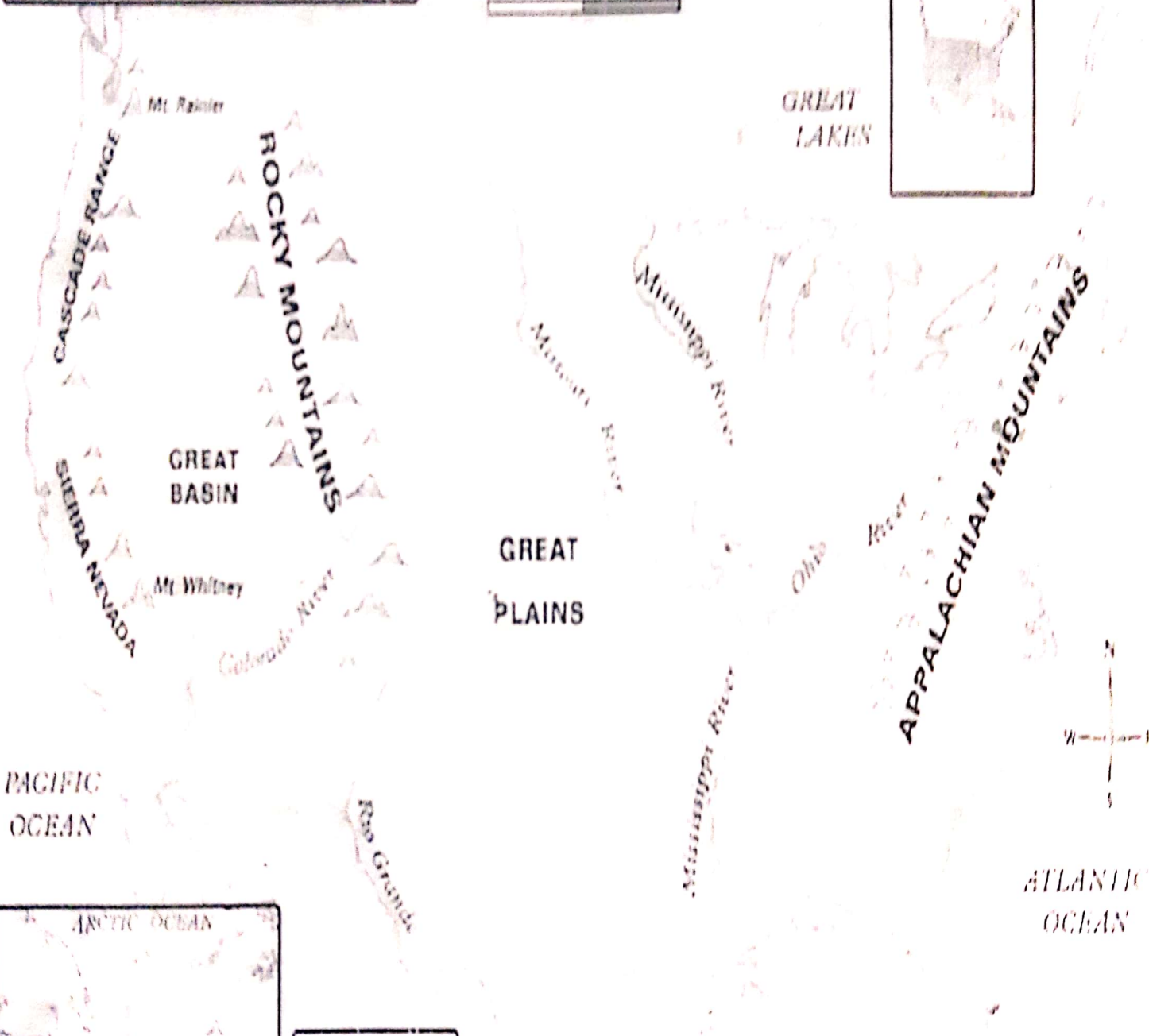
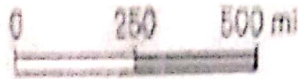
These holidays honor an important person or an event in U.S. history.

For example, the Declaration of Independence was signed on July 4.

North America



United States



Deserts	Woodlands
Grasslands	Tundra
Tropical forests	Mountains

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