An Overview of The United States Geography The United States is a country in North America, a federal republic of 50 states. Besides the 48 conterminous states that occupy the middle latitudes of the continent, the United States includes the state of Alaska, at the northwestern extreme of North America, and the island state of Hawaii, in the mid-Pacific Ocean. The conterminous states are bounded on the north by Canada, on the east by the Atlantic Ocean, on the south by the Gulf of Mexico and Mexico, and on the west by the Pacific Ocean. The United States is the fourth largest country in the world in area (after Russia, Canada, and China). The national capital is Washington, which is coextensive with the District of Columbia, the federal capital region created in 1790. The major characteristic of the United States is probably its great variety. Its physical environment ranges from the Arctic to the subtropical, from the moist rain forest to the arid desert, from the rugged mountain peak to the flat prairie. Although the total population of the United States is large by world standards, its overall population density is relatively low. The country embraces some of the world's largest urban concentrations as well as some of the most extensive areas that are almost devoid of habitation. The United States contains a highly diverse population. Unlike a country such as China that largely incorporated indigenous peoples, the United States has a diversity that to a great degree has come from an immense and sustained global immigration. Probably no other country has a wider range of racial, ethnic, and cultural types than does the United States. In addition to the presence of surviving Native Americans (including American Indians, Aleuts, and Eskimos) and the descendants of Africans taken as enslaved persons to the New World, the national character has been enriched, tested, and constantly redefined by the tens of millions of immigrants who by and large have come to America hoping for greater social, political, and economic opportunities than they had in the places they left. (It should be noted that although the terms "America" and "Americans" are often used as synonyms for the United States and its citizens, respectively, they are also used in a broader sense for North, South, and Central America collectively and their citizens. The United States is relatively young by world standards, being less than 250 years old; it achieved its current size only in the mid-20th century. America was the first of the European colonies to separate successfully from its motherland, and it was the first nation to be established on the premise that sovereignty rests with its citizens and not with the government. In its first century and a half, the country was mainly preoccupied with its own territorial expansion and economic growth and with social debates that ultimately led to civil war and a healing period that is still not complete. In the 20th century the United States emerged as a world power, and since World War II it has been one of the preeminent powers. It has not accepted this mantle easily nor always carried it willingly; the principles and ideals of its founders have been tested by the pressures and exigencies of its dominant status. The United States still offers its residents opportunities for unparalleled personal advancement and wealth. However, the depletion of its resources, the contamination of its environment, and the continuing social and economic inequality that perpetuates areas of poverty and blight all threaten the fabric of the country. Land The two great sets of elements that mold the physical environment of the United States are, first, the geologic, which determines the main patterns of landforms, drainage, and mineral resources and influences soils to a lesser degree, and, second, the atmospheric, which dictates not only climate and weather but also in large part the distribution of soils, plants, and animals. The center of the

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conterminous United States is a great sprawling interior lowland, reaching from the ancient shield of central Canada on the north to the Gulf of Mexico on the south. To east and west this lowland rises, first gradually and then abruptly, to mountain ranges that divide it from the sea on both sides. The two mountain systems differ drastically. The Appalachian Mountains on the east are low, almost unbroken, and in the main set well back from the Atlantic. From New York to the Mexican border stretches the low Coastal Plain, which faces the ocean along a swampy, convoluted coast. The gently sloping surface of the plain extends out beneath the sea, where it forms the continental shelf, which, although submerged beneath shallow ocean water, is geologically identical to the Coastal Plain. Southward the plain grows wider, swinging westward in Georgia and Alabama to truncate the Appalachians along their southern extremity and separate the interior lowland from the Gulf. West of the Central Lowland is the mighty Cordillera, part of a global mountain system that rings the Pacific basin. The Cordillera encompasses fully one–third of the United States, with an internal variety commensurate with its size. At its eastern margin lie the Rocky Mountains, a high, diverse, and discontinuous chain that stretches all the way from New Mexico to the Canadian border. The Cordillera's western edge is a Pacific coastal chain of rugged mountains and inland valleys, the whole rising spectacularly from the sea without benefit of a coastal plain. Pent between the Rockies and the Pacific chain is a vast intermontane complex of basins, plateaus, and isolated ranges so large and remarkable that they merit recognition as a region separate from the Cordillera itself.

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