

Hawaii Reporter

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Good Decisions Require Geographic Awareness

By David Keeling, 10/26/2009 9:05:21 AM

Examples of the lack of geographic awareness displayed by politicians, business leaders, and even beauty queens, are legion. Who can forget presidential candidate John McCain's 2008 gaffe on Good Morning America when he referred to the Iraq/Pakistan border (he meant the Afghanistan/Pakistan border, of course). Yet it's likely that most Americans following the campaigns would not have known that his statement was geographically inaccurate.

In recent months, growing concern over a potential apocalypse in 2012, along with recent tsunamis and earthquakes in the Pacific region, melting Arctic ice, and the war in Afghanistan, has set tongues awagging around the world about the future of our planet. Our ability to address this future is very much linked to geographic awareness, or the lack thereof.

If we put uninformed hysteria, conspiracy theories and, yes, political missteps, aside, there are legitimate challenges facing societies as they struggle to understand and manage a dynamic and changing planet. Wars, natural disasters, climate change, environmental pollution, and species extinction all grab headlines from time to time and stir debate about appropriate responses, policy needs, or infrastructural challenges.

Yet there seems to be a palpable sense of policy paralysis on critical issues like global climate change, and dysfunctional responses to disasters like Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans appear more the norm than the exception. What U.S. policymakers desperately need is a better understanding of the why of where. A deeper level of geographic awareness can help officials anticipate problems and respond proactively rather than be caught unprepared and unsure of how to react.

Never before in the history of the United States have the political consequences of a lack of geographic awareness been so critical to the future of the entire planet, yet so ignored by the media and the general public. This is not a partisan issue either, as both political parties have demonstrated a palpable ignorance about the world's geography ever since World War II, when the U.S. assumed its position as global hegemon.

Presidents from Teddy Roosevelt to FDR benefited from sage advice provided by the president's geographer, but no chief executive since FDR has really understood the value of geographical analysis. It's not surprising, then, that WWII was the last major military success for the U.S. (Grenada and Panama really don't count), with misadventures in Vietnam, the Middle East, Central America and, recently, Afghanistan and Iraq damaging to America's standing around the world and to its role as a global leader.

The U.S. remains one of the few advanced societies where it is possible for most citizens to move from kindergarten to post-graduate life without any exposure to geography as an analytical science. A very substantial number of the country's policy making elite graduate from top-flight universities where geography is not taught. This embarrassing list of elite institutions includes Harvard, Tufts, Columbia, Wellesley, Princeton, and Yale. Would the recent course of history have been different if George W. Bush had taken classes in regional or human geography at Yale or the Harvard Business School, or Donald Rumsfeld had studied political geography at Princeton?

Would President Obama be better prepared to handle the Afghanistan and Iran challenges if he had studied geography at Occidental, Columbia, or Harvard? How can the U.S. take a leading role in a global society when so many public policy makers head to Washington with such a geographically challenged background!

For decades, geographers have pointed out that the key to better planning for wars, disasters, climate shifts, or any other major force of change is a broader understanding of their spatial dimensions. They have also

demonstrated time after time that a lack of geographic awareness about the peoples and places affected by war, natural and other disasters often exacerbates the misery and compounds the challenges to effective recovery. New technologies such as geographic information (GIS) and global positioning (GPS) systems can help to build awareness about changing environments and they can provide the foundation upon which meaningful spatial analysis, and thus appropriate policy, is created.

Technology alone, however, is not the answer. Developing a greater level of geographic awareness among policy makers and the general public is crucial if our society is to manage serious challenges like natural disasters, climate change, and conflict more successfully in the future. Failure in this endeavor is not an option, as we stand to lose our leadership credibility, quality of life and, ultimately, our security if geographic ignorance continues unabated.

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