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EDITORIALS

Awash in a Sea of Geographical Ignorance

By: [Alexander B. Murphy](#)
(Jan 12, 2004)

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The role of the United States in the world has never been the subject of as much scrutiny as it is today. Yet what do we Americans know about the world?

A predictably depressing answer comes from surveys of geographical understanding. From the halls of our schools to the highest reaches of our government, the evidence suggests that Americans have only a vague understanding of how the world is organized politically, economically, culturally, or environmentally.

If we were an isolated nation, such ignorance might be excusable. But the fact is that our country exerts an unprecedented influence in global affairs. In light of our status as the world's sole superpower, American geographical myopia amounts to a real threat, both to ourselves and to others.

The issue is not just whether people know the names and locations of capital cities or rivers - a common misconception of what geography is all about. The question is whether voters and decision makers understand the geographic context within which events are situated.

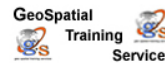
Take Iraq as an example. The debate that developed before the U.S. invasion was characterized by extraordinary geographical naiveté, both within government circles and in the wider public arena.

Iraq had been in the headlines for weeks before attention was directed to one of the country's most basic geographical characteristics: its division into three major ethnic regions. And almost nothing was said about internal divisions within those groups, the "spill-over" of Iraq's ethnic groups into other countries, or the relationship between ethnic patterns and concentrations of key resources.

Some public officials spoke of the reconstruction of Iraq as being comparable to the post-World War II reconstruction of Japan or Germany. Yet few people pointed out the glaring differences between the task of putting two fairly cohesive countries back on their feet and the project of rebuilding a place like Iraq, with all its internal ethnic, religious, and political complexity. Is it surprising that the course of post-war reconstruction of Iraq has not run according to many people's expectations?

And what of the larger geopolitical context? Supporters of the Bush administration's policy in Iraq argue that it can help us undermine terrorism in "the Islamic World"-a geographic concept that goes largely undefined. Many discussions of the Islamic World simply treat it as a largely undifferentiated area characterized by religious conservatism, economic and cultural backwardness, and vehement anti-Americanism.

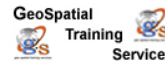
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- It's still evolving.

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How many Americans know that Iraq's Islamic neighbor, Iran, is dominated by Persians, not Arabs; that a variety of states in the Islamic World have fought over their borders for decades; or that one of the obstacles to unity movements within the Islamic world has been widely differing levels of socioeconomic well-being among potential participants?

Because American society is based on democratic participation by the population in decision making, it is imperative that Americans have some understanding of these things. Yet, by and large, we do not; and our ignorance puts us in a very poor position even to begin to evaluate the geopolitical consequences of current U.S. policy toward Iraq.

Did the Bush administration's effort to lump Iraq and Iran together in an "axis of evil" play into the hands of hard-line clerics in Iran who want to paint the United States as an aggressive, anti-Islamic power? Did it make sense to encourage Turkey to send troops to Iraq, given the historic role of Turks in Iraq and the presence of Kurds in both countries? Whatever position one takes on such questions, we are unlikely even to ask them unless geography is part of the equation.

The United States is the only country with a significant international political and economic influence where it is possible to go from kindergarten through university without a single basic course in geography. Some of our most prestigious universities do not even have geography departments-an unthinkable circumstance in other parts of the world. (When I told a German professor that my alma mater, Yale, did not teach geography, he commented, "But I thought Yale was a university.")

There is some cause for hope. Over the past decade, geography's place in the curriculum has expanded in primary and secondary schools, and most major state universities, as well as some smaller colleges, support geography programs. But much more is needed.

How different might the history of the 1960s have been if Robert McNamara had taken a geography course at Harvard? How can we possibly steer our way through the current thicket of international challenges when much of our leadership comes out of institutions that neglect geography?

We should no longer simply be talking about geography as a positive addition to a well-rounded education. We should be talking about it as a matter of vital national and international importance.

Alexander B. Murphy
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 Professor of Geography, University of Oregon

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