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U.S. must defeat geographical ignorance

By DAVID KEELING

GEOGRAPHIC ignorance of the world around us presents significant challenges for the United States during 2007 and beyond. In the White House and on the factory floor, along the halls of Congress and in the classrooms of schools and universities, a profound lack of knowledge about basic geography continues to limit America's ability to make significant political, economic, and social progress.

As the President lobbies to reauthorize the No Child Left Behind Act, perhaps he should also consider a No American Left Geographically Ignorant Act. Improved geographic education could ensure that Americans were better prepared to participate more productively in the global system.

Americans live, work, and play in a global society. From the clothes we wear and the gasoline we burn, to the food we eat and the technology on which we depend, we are inextricably intertwined with the wider world.

U.S. policies that drive the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, structure responses to the geopolitical challenges posed by Africa and the Middle East, and influence illegal immigration and trade deficits, are predicated on a basic understanding of how geography shapes people, places, and resources across the globe.

Most of the biggest challenges facing the planet in 2007 and beyond are fundamentally geographic in nature. Global climate change, economic globalization, disease, poverty, sustainability, and conflict, for example, all have spatial or geographical dimensions that are critical and elemental.

In order to develop meaningful responses to these challenges, policy-makers must understand their geographies. They need to have more than a simple, superficial knowledge of where or when. They must understand how and why geography shapes these challenges and they must develop the ability to use geographic knowledge and technology to find meaningful solutions to society's problems.

Why have Americans become so geographically ignorant about the world around them? Myriad polls and surveys leave no doubt that we are among the most geographically illiterate of all developed societies.

The ranks of Americans who have ever taken a geography class in high school or university are small. Indeed, an entire generation of business executives, politicians, policy makers, captains of industry, and movers and shakers has grown up with nary a hint of geographic literacy on their rsums.

Although geography has enjoyed a higher education renaissance in recent years, with some exceptional programs at many public and private colleges across the country, geographic education remains the exception rather than the rule in America today.

Indeed, the attitude of many college admissions officers, deans, provosts, and presidents towards geography as critical in preparing students for success in a global society remains antediluvian.

Witness the recent outburst from a Pomona College admissions official who questioned Advanced Placement Human Geography courses for high school seniors and recounted how his colleagues had reacted with confusion and laughter upon seeing an AP geography course on a potential student's transcript.

Part of the problem is that most of the people teaching geography at the K-12 level, when it is taught at all, have not studied geography at the university level. Very often, they are coaches or social studies majors who have no idea why they are teaching geography. These educators are the ones writing the social studies content standards for the K-12 schools at the state level.

Overcoming geographic ignorance about America's role in the global system, from economics and resources to politics and policies, will become ever more critical as today's generation begins to enter society.

Tomorrow's politicians, business leaders, policy makers, and citizens face a set of global challenges related to geopolitics, environment, resources, and social development that cannot be addressed by one single military or economic superpower.

If Americans remain woefully ignorant about the spatial dimensions of global climate change or the inherent geopolitical dangers in an increasingly networked world, then the country has little chance of taking a proactive leadership role in addressing global problems.

Before the United States invades another country or fails to sign another international treaty, the government should embark on a No American Left Geographically Ignorant campaign.

Overcoming geographic ignorance should be one of the most important missions for our nation over the next few years. Perhaps, then, a future president could stand before the next generation of geographically informed Americans and proudly proclaim: Mission Accomplished!

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