

U B I Q U E

Notes from THE AMERICAN GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY

A 21st Century Definition for Geography?

Jerome E. Dobson
President



Secrets of the Ages hidden beneath Washington, DC? Can it be true? Dan Brown raises this intriguing prospect in his new novel, *The Lost Symbol*. Fictional hero Robert Langdon, a Harvard University professor of religious iconography and symbology, rushes from symbol to symbol and sign to sign, all hidden in plain sight yet decipherable supposedly by only those ordained in the world's most exclusive secret order or, alternatively, by the wisest of scholars.

Washington landmarks mentioned in Brown's book are gearing up for an onslaught of tourists in the coming year. Most of the sites were already popular, but some, especially the House of the Temple of the Scottish Rite, may be thronged as never before by knowledge seekers staring at walls and clawing at floors.

Could there be any truth to Brown's premise? Is it possible that untold wisdom lurks beneath the surface of a city so notoriously unknown for it above? Are Washington's streets underlain by subterranean passageways? Yes. Underground chambers brimming with symbols and signs so obtuse that even a Harvard professor wouldn't catch their true meaning? Yes on all counts.

I have seen it with my own eyes. One of the world's deepest mysteries has been solved. A puzzle that has confounded scholars for two and a half millennia has been unraveled. All in a sign viewed daily by thousands of unsuspecting passersby and posted by an organization from which millions of Americans draw strength to face each day. I'm speaking, of course, of the age old mystery, "What is geography?"

I came across it on my daily commute to work at the U. S. Department of State where I'm spending this year as a Jefferson Science Fellow and Senior Scientist in the Office of The Geographer and Global Issues. I live in Bethesda and work at Foggy Bottom, so I pass through Metro Center twice a day.

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The American Geographical Society Archives

AGS began to acquire archival materials soon after its founding in 1851. The archives continued to grow through periods of discovery, settlement, war, political upheaval, and technological change. AGS has played a direct role in many significant world events during its 158 years of existence, and its archives hold a wealth of materials pertaining to those involvements. The Society's active roles in affairs of state, exploration, and economic change have also made it a magnet for materials from other sources.

The AGS archives contain field notes, original maps, sketches, photographs, journals, correspondence, meeting records, artifacts, expedition flags and memorabilia, field equipment, telegrams, clippings, event programs, radio logs, and many other primary documents and artifacts. Materials pertaining to polar exploration and research comprise a particularly important segment of the collection. Latin America is a further strength—many of the materials used to complete the Society's 107-sheet "Millionth Map of Hispanic America" over a 25-year period are contained in the archive. AGS conducted a prominent research and consulting service for the American delegation to the Paris Peace talks at the end of World War I, and this is also reflected in the archives.

During the recent International Polar Year, many boxes of material, completely dormant during the 30 years following the Society's move from its building in upper Manhattan, were examined for relics from its polar expeditions. Items found during 2008 and 2009 include flags from several important expeditions, artifacts from famous ships, and cairn messages dating as far back as the 1850s. Other items include the logs and journals of Sir Hubert Wilkins, Donald MacMillan, Isaac Israel Hayes, Richard Byrd, Louise Boyd, Robert Peary (AGS President 1903-07), Vilhjálmur Stefánsson, Bob Bartlett, and many others. The collection contains original sketches and paintings by Peary, Hayes, Alberto Operti, Robert Flaherty, and indigenous inhabitants of the Arctic. Also contained are relics from the expeditions of Elisha Kent Kane, Adolphus Greely, Fridtjof Nansen, Roald



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OPINION PIECE

NOTE: Since January 2004 when the American Geographical Society began distributing OpEds, more than twenty geographers, ranging from graduate students to full professors and a few think-tank researchers, have contributed a total of 59 pieces as of November 10, 2009.

Roughly 100 different outlets—Newspapers and blogs—including international outlets in Russia, Mexico, Haiti, and Canada have carried the OpEds.

The newspapers have included, among others, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Washington Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Hawaii Reporter*, *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, *Pravda*, *Toledo Blade*, *Austin Statesman*, *Tampa Tribune*, and *Anchorage Press*, as well as numerous small-market and university newspapers such as *Yale Daily News*, *The Brownsville Herald*, etc.

This Keeling OpEd was printed in the *Hawaii Reporter* among other newspapers.



Islam's Troubled Geography

by

David J. Keeling

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's recent visit to Pakistan and the Middle East, along with the shooting tragedy at Ft. Hood, has put radical Islam under the microscope again. Around the country, bloggers, journalists, military leaders, and the FBI are trying to make sense of, and explain, the Ft. Hood shooting. However, there is a bigger issue for U.S. policymakers to consider that appears to be lost in the rhetoric about the shooting and potential links to radical Islam. Secretary Clinton addressed this issue indirectly both in Pakistan and in Jerusalem during her recent tour. Radical Islam has more to do with troubled geography than with religious ideology, and herein lies the problem. A lack of understanding about Islam's geography continues to hinder any real progress in finding solutions to big problems like terrorism, authoritarianism, and miserable socio-economic conditions for millions of Muslims.

Islam's position at the geographic center of world trade from the 10th to the 16th centuries played an important role in its scientific, economic, and political influence. Islam's diverse constituent societies mediated trade and communication between East and West, notwithstanding the threats to religious and territorial integrity from orthodox 'Ulama, the Crusades, the Mongols, and others. The rise of the Atlantic-centered economy from the 16th century onwards, spurred by European advances in shipping, weaponry, and New World resources, weakened the Islamic world, reduced its profits, and put significant pressure on its social structures. Although Islam stretched from Mauritania and the Balkans to southeast Asia, Muslim Arab populations remained quite small, while in non-Arab regions, Islamic polities ruled significant numbers of non-Muslims. With the rise of imperial, industrial Western Europe in the 19th century, traditional Middle Eastern territories became increasingly marginalized, and attractive targets for European capital, political intrigue, and territorial ambitions. Territory provided access to resources, which funded political and economic power. Power, in turn, facilitated the acquisition of, or influence over, more territory.

Over the past century, Islam, and particularly the Middle Eastern countries, suffered from external political and economic strategies driven by a desire to control and influence territory, thus providing access to resources (like oil) and enhancing power. The best interests of the Western capitalist economies were met by supporting archaic, despotic, and absolutist monarchies and dictatorships that ensured stability and a territorial status quo. The rising tide of regional nationalism remained severely constrained as potential democracies ran into the buzz saw of corrupt regimes that repressed and marginalized mainstream Islamists. Corruption and repression forced political extremists underground or to the territorial hinterlands (Sudan, Pakistan's Swat Valley, or rural Afghanistan), which contributed, in part, to the rise of anti-Americanism and global terrorism.

These days, a strong belief exists around the world that Islam is anti-democratic, anti-capitalist, and anti-West. Little doubt exists that distorted interpretations of Islamic religious texts have been used to justify the slaughter of innocents, but this does not mean that mainstream Islam and its constituent territories unanimously support this approach. Just recently, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group proclaimed a new Jihadi Code that denounced Al Qaeda's tactics and called for Islamic extremists to use peaceful means for their cause, arguing that violence against innocents is un-Islamic. Indeed, many Islamists support the argument that Islam needs significant political and social reform if it is to cope with the challenges of a 21st century global society.

However, achieving a more peaceful Islamic world that is integrated into a democratic, capitalist global system requires a re-evaluation of its geographies and of its external and internal relationships. Territorial solutions to Palestinian desires for a national territory, to Kurdish demands for freedom, to Israeli security, or to a democratic Iraq and Afghanistan, and for a host of other political, economic, and social needs require



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A 21st Century Definition for Geography

Recently, ascending an escalator in that cavernous station, I found myself facing a huge Starbucks banner that proclaimed, "Geography = Unique Coffee Flavor." So, there you have it, folks, geography defined with such mathematical precision that you can almost taste it. Thanks to Starbucks, every Metro rider in our Nation's Capital knows the answer to a question that still stumps Harvard.

There are, of course, many fine definitions in circulation, mostly amongst our own secret order of geographers. How does this one stack up? Is it true? Well, yes, it is true, though not sufficient, most of us would say. It comes under the part of our definition that covers geography as real world phenomena distinctive due to location. Coffee itself is a geographic phenomenon with distinctive characteristics, including flavor, that vary due to unique combinations of other geographic phenomena, such as elevation, climate, and culture. That's about as geographic as it gets. So, yes, clearly Starbucks knows its geography as well as its coffee.



edge about places, and a set of information technologies that have been around for centuries. Geography is about understanding people and places and how real-world places function in a viscerally organic sense. It's about understanding spatial distributions and interpreting what they mean. It's about using technology to study, in the words of the late professor J. Rowland Illick, 'why people do what they do where they do it.'" And finally I offered a newly refined definition, "Geography is a dimensional science and humanity, based on spatial logic in which locations, flows,

and spatial associations are considered to be primary evidence of earth processes, both physical and cultural. Its hallmarks are spatial analysis, place-based research (e.g., regional studies, area studies, urban studies), [fieldwork,] and scientific integration." (Dobson 2007) The article generated a tremendous public response, but still no reaction to the definition per se.

Then, sometime last year I came across this remarkable statement, "[I]s it now opportune to put forth a practical 21st Century definition of geography? Yes, indeed! For example, Jerome E. Dobson [1993] offered a definition found useful by us: "Geography is the pursuit of spatial logic . . . [because] both spatial and process logic are necessary to solve complex Earth problems." (Cathcart et al 2006)

The pervasive indifference that had humbled and worried me since 1993 then suddenly gave way to praise so effusive that I have been reluctant to repeat it, "Whether he is aware of the fact or not, Dobson follows in the footsteps of two great geoscience prophets, Thomas Chrowder Chamberlin and Alfred Lother Wegener (1880-1930), and himself pioneers a new trail for moderns to trudge when it comes to future "Earth sciences". (Cathcart et al 2006)

I am deeply grateful to the authors for bringing a measure of legitimacy to what had been my solo quest. I recognize, however, that much broader debate within the geographic community will be necessary if this or any other definition is to bring cohesion to our disparate discipline. Here, I simply urge you to consider it thoughtfully and use it, if you like, or promote another. Many good ones have been proposed, or you can compose your own candidate. The challenge is to find one that covers the whole discipline, contains enough

But geography is more than unique coffee flavor. It's a complex science and humanity that's easy enough to define in part but difficult to define as a whole. For most of my career, I assiduously avoided defining it simply because I am, at heart, a man of peace. Some people couldn't care less, but others get terribly agitated if the parts defined are not their own. Eventually, however, I felt compelled to write a definition based on my own personal observations of geographers and their work. I tried to capture the whole and to say what, above all else, distinguishes ours from other disciplines. "Geography is the exercise of spatial logic—a form of reasoning in which morphology, landscape, spatial coincidence, spatial distribution, spatial association, and spatial relationships are considered to be primary evidence of both physical and cultural processes." (Dobson 1993) No one responded to this in print or in person, so I assumed no one saw any value in it.

Recently, I tried again, starting with a simple analogy— "Geography is to space what history is to time." — that greatly appealed to many non-geographers. I set the context: "It is a spatial way of thinking, a science with distinctive methods and tools, a body of knowl-



IN MEMORIAM

Dr. Larry R. Ford, one of America's leading urban geographers for the last quarter century, began and ended his stellar career of nearly forty years at San Diego State University. A native of Oklahoma, he spent his school years in Columbus, Ohio, where he continued his education at Ohio State University (B.A. 1965, M.A. 1967). With his Masters degree in hand, and recently married to his wife Jan, he jumped westward to the University of Oregon for Ph.D. work.



1943 - 2009

Arriving in Oregon, he found a much different academic environment than what he had encountered at Ohio State. Amidst a bevy of Berkeley Ph.D.s influenced by Carl Sauer, Larry fell for the landscape approach to practicing geography. In contrast to the bulk of the rural-oriented Sauerian fold, however, he launched himself wholly and fully into the world of the city. He found support in this pursuit from Berkeley-trained Edward T. Price, but his real anchor in the department (and his lifetime mentor) was Everett Smith, a University of Minnesota-trained urban geographer who knew then-student Ford was onto something. Rapidly fulfilling his Ph.D. requirements, now Dr. Ford headed for San Diego in 1970.

From his graduate days at Oregon through his last days in San Diego, Larry Ford relentlessly pursued his quest for learning about cities and for telling the rest of the world what he saw and thought. He left us five books (and another book manuscript submitted for publication), dozens of refereed journal articles and countless presentations at professional meetings. He put his observations and ideas to practical use, serving on San Diego's planning commission and doing historic preservation work. In the 1970s and into the 1980s Dr. Ford at times co-published articles with fellow geographers Ernst Griffin, Richard Fusch, and Jim Curtis. But he soon went entirely solo (other than his work with his graduate students), and trod a distinctive path.

Larry Ford was consumed with perceiving, organizing and analyzing urban space and urban form. He did it his own way, through incessant field work, reading widely in the adjacent fields of urban planning and architecture, as well as in geography. He was never swept up by any of the currents and fashions that other geographers adopted as one trend waned and another

appeared. Trendiness was not his thing, even though he always knew what others were up to. Dr. Ford's unique approach was to walk cities, observe, photograph, note, digest and comment. Among those who knew him reasonably well he became famous for his "forced urban marches." He would literally walk for miles at a time, taking various transects through a city to see what was there, how it stacked up with what he already knew or with what other urbanists were saying.

Where Dr. Ford also cast a distinctive shadow was in his pursuit of urban knowledge in myriad cultural situations. While most of his effort focused on cities in the United States, he published works on European, Latin American and Asian cities. He spent Fulbright residencies in Indonesia and Italy, and sabbatical time and teaching time in London. He traveled extensively in Latin America, Egypt, China, and beyond. One could reasonably claim that Larry Ford came to know some of the intricacies of more cities of the world than any other human being ever. That is a strong declaration, and one impossible to support beyond mere assertion, but he swept through cities in different parts of the globe almost every summer, and his teaching/research appointments planted him in far flung posts. That he got out and walked and walked wherever he was gave him unusual insights into an extraordinary array of urban settings. Dr. Ford always seemed to know what he was doing; he had an agenda in any urban walk he undertook, even if that agenda was unannounced to those who might trail along.

His initial work focused mainly on skyscrapers, but by the time he published his first substantial book, Cities and Buildings: Skyscrapers, Skidrows and Suburbs (1994), his interests had expanded to include urban morphology in general, land use, and issues in urban planning and architecture. Adopted by many geographers and others for their urban courses, this book proved both expansive and readable. His next book, The Spaces Between Buildings, arrived in 2000, and demonstrated the efforts of a mature scholar who insisted on looking at simply "everything" to do with "little" spaces in the urban environment. Few pieces of the city missed Dr. Ford's searching eye, and his vast experience enabled him to comment on and interpret