

U.S. Foreign Policy and a Geographically Challenged U.S. Citizenry*

David L. Carr

Is it a coincidence that the United States stands apart from the rest of the developed world in geography education and in foreign policy? According to a recent National Geographic Society (NGS) survey of nine nations, U.S. young adults were next to last in knowledge of the world's geography—only Mexican youth fared worse; Swedes nearly doubled the U.S. score (National Geographic 2002). Of U.S. youths tested, slightly more than one in ten could find Iraq on a map and nearly one-third thought the U.S. population exceeds one billion.

Since the presidential election in 2000, many of my friends abroad have struggled to understand the widening gulf between the political positions of their American friends and colleagues and that of our administration. A personal anecdote is illustrative. As one of only a handful of U.S. citizens participating in a United Nations (UN) Stakeholder Conference at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), I soon realized that many of the 334 conference delegates were uncomfortable in my presence. The consternation I read on their faces seemed directed at me personally until they explained that their frustration was not with me, but with the U.S. government. "Does the American public know what a pariah the U.S. government is to the rest of the world?" asked several delegates. "No, on the contrary," I replied, "it seems that the 'American Street' wonders how our foreign neighbors could be so insensitive to the events of 9/11 and unsupportive of our government's war on terror." Bush's November 2004 majority electoral victory challenges our overseas allies with a seemingly irreconcilable cognitive dissonance: how can they remain pro-American when a majority of voting Americans re-elected President Bush? The misunderstandings of each other's positions could be allayed, and the distances between them bridged, with an improved understanding of world geography—not simply learning place locations, but learning why they are located where they are—and how cultural, religious, and historic geographies help explain our current political differences. This improved geographical understanding would help instill in us the values that we all should share: reducing human and environmental suffering and promoting human material and spiritual well-being in harmony with our natural environment.

What would a more geographically knowledgeable electorate opine of our current foreign policy? Even

with recent increases in foreign aid, our total overseas assistance comes to less than one-fifth of our 1992 pledge to donate 0.7% of our Gross National Product (GNP) to foreign aid. At the Rio Earth Summit ten years ago, the world's richest nations committed to halve poverty by 2007, to eradicate hunger, to reduce under-5 mortality by two-thirds, and to enroll all school-age children in school. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development recently estimated the cost of achieving these goals at \$40–60 billion in excess of the amount that would have been produced from the 0.7% commitment—merely several weeks worth of our military spending. These very achievable goals remain unattained while three billion people around the world live on less than \$2 a day while the incomes of the three richest men in the United States exceed the combined GNP of the least developed nations. As geographers, we are aware that such uneven development is implicated in undesirable environmental outcomes as well. What is the general public's understanding of these broad global inequities?

The United States has provided the least (measured by U.S. foreign aid relative to the percentage of GNP) of all developed nations to rectify these geographies of inequality. Of the \$10.8 billion earmarked for foreign assistance in 2001, only about one-tenth aided the region with the direst need—sub-Saharan Africa, while a similar amount was allocated to Russia, Israel, and Egypt *each*. Our 2002 farm bill will subsidize U.S. farmers over the next 10 years by at least \$190 billion, ensuring burgeoning surpluses produced below cost, much of which will be exported to poor countries. Such agro-dumping pushes small overseas farmers out of business, costing poor nations billions more in lost revenue than they receive in foreign aid—swelling the ranks living in grinding poverty, and exacerbating global food insecurity. In a bizarre twist, U.S. agricultural surpluses that are shipped to needy countries are enabled by the same generous domestic subsidies and stiff tariffs that cripple the poorest countries' agricultural production in the first place.

How well do average Americans understand the effect of our protectionism on the world's most destitute? Progress toward a more geographically equitable world would be greatly advanced by a firm commitment by the world's most powerful nation to global accords such as the WTO, Kyoto, and Johannesburg agreements. Such commitment ultimately depends on a geographically

sensitive constituency that demands these concerns become a policy priority.

We, as a society, may want to reconsider the role geography should play in public school curricula (Murphy 2003). Should we, for example, remain the only major developed nation where it is possible to advance from primary school to university without ever taking a course in geography? How can social science teachers incorporate concepts of geography in current events courses? The NGS survey corroborates that education is the difference maker. Results found that “net-savvy” young adults with a college education and exposure to other cultures scored considerably higher than the average young adult on the geography awareness quiz (National Geographic-Roper Global Geographical Literacy 2002).

Promising initiatives exist to reverse our geographical ignorance. My Community, Our Earth (MyCOE): Geographic Learning for Sustainable Development is a partnership that was formed in concert with the 2002 WSSD. The program encourages secondary and university students to collaborate on projects that apply geographic theories and tools towards solving real problems relating to sustainable development in their home communities (MyCOE, 2005). At the 2002 WSSD, 200 projects were submitted from 27 nations, from which ten were selected for display. The sustainable development goals of student projects reflect initiatives agreed to by participating nations in the WSSD as outlined in the 1992 Earth Summit “Agenda 21.” These goals are applied to real problems on the ground such as waste management in Haiti, the public management of natural resources in Ecuador, and rural and urban land use in Chile. Most recently, MyCOE is focusing on youth programs that foster global collaborations in geographic learning aimed at implementing sustainable development solutions in students’ home communities. The program has been successful because students learn by doing, allowing for abstract relations between society and nature to become concrete. By applying solutions in their own communities, students associate their geographical knowledge with a sense of accomplishment, pride, and empowerment. Parents see the tangible effects of student projects and, in turn, encourage students to continue learning geography.

Let us further enhance the power of geographical learning by promoting hands-on programs such as MyCOE that ground complex international society-environment relations in tangible terms. To harness such projects’ full pedagogical power we can start with what students already know about *human* relations. We were all taught in kindergarten to clean up our own mess and to share the sandbox with our neighbors. Sure, the world is more complex than kindergarten. Yet when billions of people earn less in a day than the U.S. hourly minimum wage, I wonder if this is the sort of “sharing with our neighbors” that our teachers had in mind. Where are our geographical sensibilities?

These, and related questions, beg scrutiny by teachers of geography. A decade ago, the NGS produced a landmark book outlining geographical standards for our public schools (Geography Education Standards Project 1994). These standards have yet to be adopted on a national scale. National geographical literacy standards for all public school children building on the NGS standards should be a priority. MyCOE has been launched with great success but at a limited scale. This and similar projects should be expanded to reach all public schools. At the university level, world regional geography should become a core offering. If no U.S. child really is left behind, they should know where other children are.

David L. Carr is an assistant professor in Department of Geography at University of California, Santa Barbara.

References

- Geography Education Standards Project. 1994. *Geography For Life National Geography Standards*. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society Committee on Research and Exploration.
- Murphy, Alexander. 2003. Minneapolis-St. Paul Star Tribune. America neglecting geography at its peril. Editorial November 21, 2003.
- My Community, Our Earth Project: Geographic Learning for Sustainable Development (MyCOE). 2005. <http://www.geography.org/sustainable/>
- National Geographic-Roper Global Geographical Literacy. November 2002. [<http://geosurvey.nationalgeographic.com/geosurvey/download/RoperSurvey.pdf>] (Accessed 12/10/03)

*Some of the content presented in this commentary appeared in: Carr, David L. 2002. “Our Foreign Aid Just Isn’t Enough.” Editorial published in the *News & Observer*, Raleigh, North Carolina. November 26, 2002.