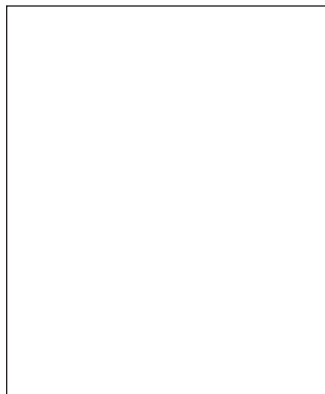

Geography in American History Courses



Geography has long been a stepchild of U.S. education. Now, with accountability pressures shrinking the curriculum, there is even less of a chance that geography will take its place as a separate subject. Mr. Thornton suggests that the best solution might be to integrate a geography strand into American history courses, which seem to hold a secure place in the schools.

BY STEPHEN J. THORNTON

ALTHOUGH U.S. troops have been on the ground there since 2003, as of 2006 only 37% of young Americans could find Iraq on a map.¹ Laments that young Americans are geographically illiterate have been around for a long time, of course. Every now and then, some test or poll reveals how little geography young Americans know. The usual response is alarm. Critics, who range from businesspeople and politicians to geographers and educators, rail against the failings of schools in teaching geography.

Today, geography faces stiff curricular competition from the continuing emphasis of policy makers on the three R's and science. In many places, this competition seems to have squeezed out any systematic attention to geography or the other social studies, particularly in elementary school. What's more, it doesn't look like things are going to turn around anytime soon.

Although I cannot do much about the amount of geography states and school districts require, I propose one step that may help improve school geography: meaningfully integrate the subject into the teaching of American history, which enjoys a secure place in school programs.² This step may do more to ensure that solid attention is paid to geography than the patchwork of reforms of the past few decades, which have varied in their intrinsic worth, breadth of dissemination, and effectiveness of implementation.³ Curiously, despite its intuitive appeal, the idea of

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teaching geography in American history courses has seldom attracted sustained attention.

In addition to creating a new space for geography, this approach offers an educational bonus: enriching the meaning of American history. As recent scholarship attests,⁴ contemporary historians are showing fresh appreciation for Frederick Jackson Turner's insight that "the master key to American history is to be found in the relation of geography to that history."⁵ Moreover, with some imagination, it may be possible to incorporate a significant amount of geography into the standard American history survey courses without adding to their length.

Before proceeding, I wish to underscore that I am *not* suggesting that we do away with geography as a separate subject where it already exists or that geography be taught solely in history courses. Rather, I am proposing that one possible way of helping to improve geographic education could be its meaningful integration with history. Such integration, at a minimum, would be far more educationally defensible than well-publicized attempts to improve geography through such methods as geography bees, which do little or nothing to build substantial knowledge of geographic concepts and relationships.

GEOGRAPHY AS THE 'POOR RELATION'

Young people who don't know Berlin from Baghdad or can't locate the Mediterranean or the Persian Gulf on a globe are not a new phenomenon in American education. Even more significant, however, is the lack of understanding of geographic relationships. A recent news report about

security at the nation's ports, for example, pointed out that few Americans appreciate how much of their daily livelihood depends on seaborne goods. Lucy Sprague Mitchell's description of children in the 1930s living in a world of disconnected "end-products" still seems apt.⁶

It also seems to be overlooked — or forgotten — that decades of reports, including those from prestigious task forces and learned societies, have bemoaned geographic illiteracy but have generally failed to shift the priorities of policy makers. To understand why geography — which is, after all, routinely flagged by authorities from various ideological perspectives as "basic," along with math, English, science, and history — fares so poorly in American education requires a brief look back.

When the modern American curriculum began to take shape at the end of the 19th century, academic geographers were generally more concerned with the study of the physical world than the human world. That is, geographers studied the physical processes that shaped the Earth's surface. Early national curriculum schemes thus grouped geography with the natural sciences rather than with the humanities and social sciences. At the time, activities and methods found in school "geographies" (i.e., textbooks) implied that facts were the centerpiece of school geography. As in geography today, identifying such geographic features as states, capitals, bays, capes, mountain ranges, rivers, and so on was the focus.

As geographers began to focus more on the human or cultural issues in the early 20th century, educational leaders increasingly stressed that school geography should be taught for meaning rather than mere memorization. Both the academic field itself and the suggested pedagogical methods were beginning to modernize. Since geographers and geographic educators had played a relatively small role in the initial formulations of the U.S. curriculum, when geographers belatedly began to direct their attention to the schools, they found their subject occupying a relatively weak position compared to such subjects as history.

Moreover, both the geographers and the geographic educators were at odds with the direction of the American curriculum at the time. As social studies increasingly came to serve as the collective name for geography, history, and civics in K-12, geographers feared a loss of their subject's identity in this collective entity and spurned opportunities for collaboration with social studies educators.⁷ Thus when Harold Rugg, developer of the most influential interwar social studies program, requested assistance from subject-matter specialists in all of the social studies disciplines, geographers failed to extend help.⁸

Like geographers, historians worried that their discipline would be subsumed into the social studies, but in-

stead of opting out, they made sure that history was the dominant thread of the social studies curriculum.⁹ "Social studies teacher" came to mean, more than anything else, "history teacher." Subject-matter and methods preparation of social studies teachers, as well as the supervision of student teaching, were often left in the hands of college and university history departments. It should come as no surprise, then, that geography received much less emphasis than history.

The ascendancy of history in social studies curricula and teacher preparation helps explain why the popular as-

WHILE THE BEST HISTORY INSTRUCTION DOES DEMONSTRATE THE COMPLEMENTARY CHARACTER OF HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY, THE EVIDENCE SUGGESTS THAT MOST HISTORY INSTRUCTION DOES LITTLE TO DEVELOP GEOGRAPHIC UNDERSTANDING.

sociation of geography with disconnected facts and isolated map skills goes effectively unchallenged in much history instruction.¹⁰ It may also explain why the suggestions of curriculum policy makers that geography be integrated into social studies don't seem to have much effect in history classrooms. Even when history teachers refer to "geography," the references are mainly in passing and not substantive.¹¹ For example, history lessons often cite President Jefferson's wish to buy New Orleans as a precursor of the Louisiana Purchase. A fuller geographic perspective may or may not follow. But map work, for example, could make the reasons for the Purchase both more meaningful and more memorable. Students could better grasp what dependence on water transportation meant in 1803, and they could understand that the barrier of the Appalachian Mountains posed the threat of disunion. While the best history instruction does demonstrate the complementary character of history and geography, the evidence suggests that most history instruction does little to develop geographic understanding.

ENRICHING HISTORY INSTRUCTION THROUGH GEOGRAPHY

Already by the early 1900s a long tradition in American education had separated geography from history.¹² Geographic determinism — the faulty belief that the natural environment dictates how people live — widened this separation. This belief was espoused by some of the most prominent American geographers in the first half of the 20th century.¹³ The logic of geographic determinism

leads to the conclusion that, for example, all peoples living in the Sahara and the Sonoran deserts would respond to their similar physical environments in similar ways. This view ignores the role of human agency and culture. Although residents of both deserts do confront similar physical conditions, they respond according to their particular cultures. Geographic determinism and the damage it did to the standing of geography in higher education may have contributed to historians' disregard for nature's role in American history.

Whatever the cause, clearly American history in schools has been weak in geography. Although geography does not explain historical events in their entirety, geography must play *some* role, which goes unnoted in most history instruction. Think *geographical history* rather than historical geography.¹⁴ This is just what John Dewey was getting at when he wrote: "This setting of nature does not bear to social activities the relation that the scenery of a theatrical performance bears to a dramatic representation; it enters into the very make-up of the social happenings that form history."¹⁵ Outside of the professional literature in education, this point has recently been underscored by Jared Diamond, whose work has attracted widespread attention.¹⁶

Consider, for example, the history of the Great Plains. Explicating geographic concepts and relationships can enrich this history. But history teachers (and textbooks) seldom capitalize on this richness. Because of the relatively transparent way in which climate, soils, topography, and so forth interact, the Great Plains can be approached as a particularly instructive case of how geography influences history. The early settlers, for instance, were far too optimistic about the region's agricultural potential: they overestimated both the amount and the reliability of rainfall. The combination of unsuitable land use and periodic drought eventually brought disaster, physical and economic, to the ecologically fragile area. Yet, as one study of the representation of geography in social studies textbooks suggests, the books generally "do not offer sufficient opportunity for students to construct knowledge at the level of detail and with the cognitive flexibility" that would build geographic understanding.¹⁷

It is important to note that, as is often the case when we become aware of the geographical dimensions of a period in history, an appreciation of the geography of the Great Plains can be useful for understanding more than one topic. Take the development of the trans-Mississippi West as a whole. Settlement largely leapfrogged the Great Plains until after the Civil War. Why did people head to California and the Oregon Territory in preference to the nearer Great Plains? What effects did their transit across the Plains have on the native peoples, flora, and fauna? Why

was the Industrial Revolution a prerequisite for settlement of the Great Plains, rather than its "mere military occupation"?¹⁸ Similar questions about the interface of geography and history could be asked with regard to other regions and eras.

Reforms in geography education have not usually been aimed at history, but perhaps reformers should direct more of their energy in that direction. Geographic educators have put a great deal of time and effort into developing geographic themes, guidelines, and the like for use in curriculum development; however, this approach seems weighted to an audience predisposed to geography. It is questionable how relevant history teachers find this approach.

But those same teachers might be more influenced by illustrations of *how* to profitably combine geography and history and with *what topics*. In staff development with American history teachers, for instance, I have been struck by how taken they are with using a map to compare growing seasons in the eastern United States. They did not require encouragement to begin to speculate about what such matters of climate might have to do with where cotton was grown, why New Englanders relied so much on the seas, and so forth. Many similar opportunities surely exist for a geographic perspective on such topics as the "fall line," the Erie Canal, and the creation of the interstate highway system.

GETTING STARTED

The more effective integration of geography into the study of American history deserves our attention. What incremental changes might help?

Although some states already encourage teachers to integrate geography with history, authorities have generally been fairly quiet about just how this could be done. Similarly, although there have been appeals in the social studies literature over the years for a geographic perspective on American history, both follow-through and systematic curriculum development have been conspicuous by their absence. Articles such as this one may be useful as inspiration, but without revised curriculum policies and materials, change will be an isolated phenomenon.

Naturally, secondary history teachers who have a rich background in geography could do a good job of putting the two subjects together for themselves. Undoubtedly, some talented teachers already do so; however, such a synthesis is apt to be a product of their own thinking, because college courses in the two subjects seldom seem to make the connection. Unfortunately, most history teachers don't have a strong background in geography. They will need ready-made materials. Historians and geographers could

contribute mightily to this process.

Elementary teachers, who are responsible for all subjects in the curriculum, rarely have extensive preparation in either history or geography. But a geographic perspective when dealing with state or national history could be encouraged by tweaking curriculum guides. For example, emphasis might be placed on concepts such as “growing season” in order to distinguish conditions in the New England, the Middle Atlantic, and the Southern colonies. Map work dealing with how, where, and why the United States expanded would also be worthwhile for both geographic and historical learning. Such map work would ideally extend beyond just considering political boundaries, which history textbooks emphasize, to interpreting maps that show a more comprehensive range of relationships between the physical environment and human life. Just as with the growing use of primary historical documents in social studies instruction, maps can often be scrutinized as cultural artifacts and not presented as simply objective representations of reality.¹⁹ All maps were made by someone, for some purpose, and so they are selective in the physical and human features they include.


But these recommendations for secondary and elementary teachers would be less necessary if teacher educators modified what they do to prepare prospective and inservice teachers for this kind of curriculum. Here, too, historians and geographers could play a valuable role. In most places today, the links between the particular content of the subject-matter courses prospective teachers study and what is (or could be) in the school curriculum are incidental. The study of American history might be required, for example, but the course may have little to do with the content of fifth-grade American history. Oddly enough, historians and geographers may not think of themselves as teacher educators even though teachers spend more time in subject-matter courses than in education courses.

It doesn't seem too much to ask that American history courses in college devote at least some time to topics rich in geographic content. For example, the shifting and multiple frontiers of American history would bring in a good deal of geography, as would the “development of the Mississippi Valley.”

Social studies methods courses are the other obvious place to encourage teaching geography in American history. But there is no evidence that most instructors in these courses have taken a keen interest in doing so. Again, even a small bit of attention could serve as a powerful model for teachers.

The ideas I have sketched here need filling out, of course. My aim has been to plant the seed of one alternative to the

perennially disappointing state of geography education in U.S. schools. I have suggested these ideas not to replace other strategies for improving geographic education but to supplement them. My goal is to offer a practical alternative to doing nothing, as interested teachers could try out some of these ideas in their next lesson. Done properly, such an approach would not only increase the amount of significant geographic content taught but also enrich the history.

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