

# The Practical Side of Geography

The following commentary was submitted by Richard Randall.

It may not be well known that many people who have studied geography, including those with advanced degrees in the field, have worked effectively in areas other than teaching or conducting academic research. My own career has brought me into contact with many such individuals and I have long felt it appropriate that their contributions be duly recognized. Accordingly, I made a presentation on this topic at the 2004 Annual Meeting of the AAG in Philadelphia that identified several such people. This piece gives a brief sampling of a few of those profiles; many more can be found on the AAG website at [www.aag.org/Careers/Intro.html](http://www.aag.org/Careers/Intro.html).

My own employment over the last forty some years is an example of this type of career path outside of academia. After receiving a PhD in geography from Clark University in 1955, I began work at the CIA where I developed studies of Eastern European countries from a geographical perspective. Six years later, I took an assignment as Washington representative for Rand McNally & Company, where among my responsibilities, I obtained maps and related geographical data from federal and foreign sources to support the company's business in maps, atlases, globes, textbooks, and other products. After eleven years with Rand McNally I spent the next twenty years as the geographer of the Defense Mapping Agency as well as executive secretary of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names. In these positions, I worked with representatives of many foreign countries and served on committees of the United Nations. Knowledge of geography was a significant element in virtually all of my work.

It is the nature of these efforts, as well as the efforts of many individuals occupied with similar tasks, that led me to select "practical" to describe this type of geography.



Randall

Profiles of a few other geographers engaged in the federal government follow, with many others described as a continuation of this article on the AAG careers website.

**Barbara J. Ryan.** MA Geography, University of Denver, 1981; MS Civil Engineering, Stanford University, 1985. She has worked with U.S. Geological Survey since 1974 in various capacities and currently is Associate



Ryan

Director for Geography at USGS headquarters in Reston, VA. Her responsibilities cover programs and policies with respect to USGS activities in mapping, remote sensing, and geography. She states that "as we become better informed about natural systems and related environmental issues, we find that the various systems are rarely treated as a single discipline." She feels that geography has taught her to look at the many problems and issues from a "systems perspective." She adds that since its inception in 1878, the USGS had relied on geographers. (The USGS now has four programs: biology, geology, hydrology, and geography.)



Bruner

**Edward Bruner.** PhD in Geography, Syracuse University, 1974. Since 1991 he has been with the Congressional Research Service of the Library of Congress. Prior to this position, he had military

duties that included being instructor and assistant professor of geography at the U.S. Military Academy. Otherwise he had significant responsibilities with various military units in Germany and the U.S. Currently his assignments include being a specialist in national defense; head of the Military Forces and Threat Reduction Section of the Foreign Affairs, Defense, and

Trade Division; providing policy analyses and information to congressional members and committees; and serving as the point of contact/liason for geography to the Library of Congress Map Library. He strongly believes his PhD in geography was an important factor in being hired.

**John Kelmelis.** PhD in Geography, University of Pennsylvania, 1991. His career included military service (Air Force, Vietnam), land surveying, conducting studies related to environmental issues



Kelmelis

(wetlands) for the state of Connecticut, and working as a cartographer with the Aeronautical Chart and Information Center, part of the Defense Mapping Agency. In 1997, he joined the USGS and subsequently held key positions concerning the introduction of advanced cartography systems; studies regarding the causes and effects of global environmental changes and interaction of climatic and hydrologic systems; and programs to understand and upgrade the application of new methods related to the collection of geographical factors associated with the environment. In 2003, he accepted an assignment as Senior Counselor for Earth Science at the U.S. State Department.

For more profiles of geographers, please visit [www.aag.org/Careers/Intro.html](http://www.aag.org/Careers/Intro.html). ■

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## Note:

In preparing these profiles, I communicated with a number of people, including several long-time colleagues. Mary Lynne Bird, Executive Director of the American Geographical Society, was a major source of information and contacts. (Her 2002 talk on geographers outside of academia is recounted in the March 2004 *Ubique* article, "Hidden Geographers.") In addition, I reviewed files in the AAG headquarters where I found information about members involved in a broad scope of activities.