

Geography in an Uncertain World

The oft-quoted saying, "may you live in interesting times," is of questionable derivation (in all likelihood it cannot be attributed to Confucius), but its popular connotation captures some of the uncertainty that most of us feel at this time. From almost any vantage point, the global situation appears more volatile now than it did a few years ago. Closer to home, most of us are confronting the impacts of the recent economic downturn in the communities where we live and in the institutions where we work.

Against this backdrop, a natural instinct is to hunker down in hopes of weathering the storm. Adopting a defensive posture is sometimes important, but at the current juncture it is not necessarily the posture that will serve geography the best—or the larger society for that matter. We are a discipline that is clearly on the rise. We are expanding in important ways, and other scholarly and professional communities increasingly regard us as a source of serious research, ideas, and insights. The time is ripe for us to make a compelling, non-defensive case for what geography has to offer.

Making such a case is clearly important given the current funding crisis in higher education. Almost anyone teaching in a geography department in North America is concerned about the impact of budget cuts. In a recent presidential column, Duane Nellis outlined several things programs need to emphasize if they are to avoid debilitating cuts—expanding student credit hours, participating actively in campus affairs, devoting time to alumni relations, etc. These are all important, but even as we pursue them, we must also pay attention to the larger context of how geography itself is understood and viewed.

Any administrator who is not at the extreme "bean counter" end of the spectrum has an academic/institutional vision. Adopting a defensive posture is unlikely to appeal to that vision. Of course, it is important to let people know about the good things that programs have done in the past and about the negative

consequences of serious cuts. Yet, such arguments are unlikely to win the day unless they are part of a larger vision of the value of geographical understanding and scholarship in the contemporary world. We need to demonstrate in clear and incisive ways geography's expanding influence and society's need for geography.

It is not difficult to draw attention to geography's expanding influence. Geographers are visible contributors to scholarly exchanges on topics ranging from long-term environmental change to globalization. Current debates in international relations are infused with geographical assumptions and ideas. Geographers have pioneered the development of a host of new geospatial approaches and technologies, even as geographical concepts have played a prominent role in the "cultural turn" in the social sciences.

Geography's institutional standing is also on the rise. Over the past decade the discipline has moved from a marginal to a central position in the National Academy of Sciences—National Research Council. Geography's position at the National Science Foundation is stronger than it has ever been. The College Board has added geography to its Advanced Placement program, and the names of geographers increasingly appear among the list of grantees of prestigious organizations and foundations. Even in these troubled economic times, there is news every few months of a new or expanded geography program at a college or university.

It is essential that administrators know about these things, for they paint a picture of a discipline that colleges or universities ignore at their peril. The case for geography cannot stop there, however; for ultimately it must rest on the intellectual and practical merits of geographical inquiry. To put it another way, our challenge is to convey the utter hopelessness of confronting the issues and concerns of our

time without the benefit of geographic understanding and analysis.

In meeting that challenge, our understandable fear of being seen as a discipline focused on place-name memorization may make many of us hesitant to invoke popular conceptions of geographical ignorance. By avoiding this issue, however, we miss the opportunity to build on the commonsense notion that intelligent engagement with the world requires some understanding of how Earth's physical and human components are organized, how people live in and use particular parts of the planet's surface, and how places relate to one another. Of course, we also need to highlight how advanced geographical inquiry can shed critical light on the growing gap between rich and poor, the potential consequences of climate change, the impacts of humans on the environment, the nature and implications of ethnic conflict, and much, much more.

All this brings me back to my opening reference to current global and local uncertainties. The communities, states and countries in which we live are facing difficult and important decisions on matters ranging from the provision of social services to the development of appropriate responses to terrorist threats. As citizens and government officials confront these decisions, geographical understanding is critical. Wherever one may stand politically, it is clear that there cannot be a serious, meaningful discussion of the current situation in Iraq if (as was recently suggested) Iraq's internal character and regional situation is thought of as being analogous to Japan's after World War II. In a similar vein, a thoughtful or productive consideration of fire suppression in the American West cannot proceed without some understanding of the physical and human aspects of forest dynamics that come from geographical analysis.

Continued on page 5



Murphy

Continued from page 1

"Geology and Geography"), provided the address "Geography in the United States." He stated that while geology and geography were given equal standing in this section not once in the last twenty years had geography been addressed, and always geology dominated, a circumstance reinforced perhaps by the founding of the Geological Society of America in 1888. Davis proposed "organizing a society of geographical experts—an American Geographers Union." Immediately pursuant to this presentation, a preliminary meeting was held: thirteen of those present were supportive of the proposal for organization. These persons included C. C. Adams, H. C. Cowles, J. F. Crowell, C. R. Dryer, N. M. Fenneman, F. P. Gulliver, C. W. Hall, M. S. W. Jefferson, C. F. Marbut, W. J. McGee, R. D. Salisbury, G. B. Shattuck, and R. S. Tarr. Four more geographers who had not attended the St. Louis meeting approved the idea. (These included H. G. Bryant, A. Heilprin, M. C. Campbell, and R. E. Dodge.)

Davis returned to the Harvard Yard and whenever possible held meetings with

interested people in which he would advance his plan. Ellsworth Huntington wrote to Davis on February 5, 1925 . . . "I wonder whether you remember any more clearly than I do the day when you gathered some of us at your house, and suggested the formation of what later became the Association of American Geographers."

On 26 January 1904, Davis sent a circular to 32 persons announcing that "a private meeting for organization" was proposed on the occasion of the Eighth International Geographical Congress (IGC), to be held initially in Washington, DC in September of that year (the Congress was peripatetic and continued to Philadelphia, New York, Niagara Falls, Chicago, and St. Louis). Davis requested suggestions concerning "the formation of the Club." Convinced that he had the support necessary, he arranged the meeting for Washington, DC during the meeting of the IGC. There a Committee on Organization was appointed and directed to arrange the first meeting, which Davis suggested should be held in Philadelphia in Decem-

ber. He was made chairman of the Committee on Organization, which included H. C. Cowles, H. Gannett, A. Heilprin, and W. F. Libbey Jr. This committee drew up a list of persons considered qualified for membership, prepared a draft of a constitution (written by Davis), and called a meeting for 29-30 December in Philadelphia.

The Association of American Geographers was founded in Room 16, College Hall, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, on Thursday, 29 December 1904. Twenty-six geographers attended with Davis presiding; A. P. Brigham was appointed Secretary pro tem; a draft constitution was discussed; and the proposed title "American Geographers Association" was revised to "The Association of American Geographers." Officers were elected and 13 papers were read in full and nine were read by title.

And so the Association began its journey. ■

G. J. Martin
AAG Archivist

Disrupting Perceptions, A Geographic Photo Exhibit

Heidi J. Nast, Associate Professor of Geography at DePaul University, will have a three-month photographic exhibition at the DuSable Museum of African American History, Chicago, entitled: "Disrupting Perceptions: A Photographic History of the Kano Palace, Northern Nigeria." The photo-geographic work on the African-Islamic palace and invites the viewer to read the photographs as entry-points into a complex urban political culture. The exhibit



Shekara's House

will run from 4 August through 31 October 2003. A formal champagne reception will be held 13 September 2003 from 4-6 p.m. For more information, contact mastudil@students.depaul.edu.

Continued from page 3

The more that geography becomes part of the public debate over where our society has come from and where it is going, the more geography will be strengthened, as will society at large. Enhancing the discipline's position in public debate would thus seem to be a fitting goal as the AAG enters its second century. It is a cause to which we can all be committed, and it is at the forefront of my agenda as I begin my presidential year. I look forward to working with many of you in pursuit of this end. ■

Alexander B. Murphy
abmurphy@oregon.uoregon.edu