

# Location, Location, Location

*Schools should restore an “old-fashioned” emphasis on basic geography.*

By Walter A. McDougall

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I suppose I am an old-fashioned teacher. My subject — diplomatic history and international relations — could not be further removed from the avant-garde of post-modern cultural studies.

My methodology is traditional, centering on the critical interpretation of documentary evidence and the logic of cause and effect in the belief that facts exist and falsehood, if not perfect truth, is discoverable. My lectures and books are in narrative form, because in political history sequence is critical to understanding why decision-makers acted or reacted as they did.

And my assignments require students to demonstrate knowledge of at least the most important names, dates, and events, because concepts and theories are empty unless one knows what factual evidence inspired them and what phenomena they are advanced to explain.

Old-fashioned, demanding, some would say boring — and yet, my courses in diplomatic history draw hundreds of students. Evidently, the collegiate consumers of history, not to mention the book-buying public, find more value and enjoyment in rigorous studies of the origins of wars and peace than in speculative studies of, for instance, the “gendering” of grave-stones in 17<sup>th</sup>-century France.

The downside of having large classes, however, is that the only students I get to know personally are those who come to my office hours and voluntary discussion sections.

So it was that I was taken aback when one anonymous face from my 19th-century European diplomacy lectures visited my office accompanied by a big and decidedly business-like black Labrador dog. I was about to make a joke or a protest, when I looked up and realized the young man was blind.

He felt for a chair and asked for my help. He had received a B+ on the midterm, but was used to getting straight A's.

His problem, he said, was with maps. He could understand the ideological or commercial motivations for the foreign policies of liberal Britain, Napoleonic France, the multinational Hapsburg Empire, or reactionary tsarist Russia.

But he had trouble visualizing the strategic, balance-of-power relationships among the various states. Suddenly I felt both wholly inadequate and ashamed of feeling inadequate, given the courage he boldly displayed. If a student unable to read by himself could aspire to study history, it was incumbent upon me to assist him.

So I pulled out a map of Europe, took the boy's finger in my hand, and traced for him the coastlines of the continent and the location and boundaries of the various states.

I showed him where the mountains and rivers were located, and tried to convey their strategic significance. I described how large the countries were — hoping that he had some notion of distance — and told him how swiftly (or slowly) pre-industrial sailing ships and armies could move so that he might imagine how railroads and steamships exploded the old equation between space and time.

Never letting go of his finger lest he become disoriented, I repeated the lessons until he stopped me. His memory was extraordinary, and he soon displayed a better feel for the geopolitics of Europe than many, perhaps most, of my students blessed with sight.

He would return periodically, however, for more information, such as the locations of the provinces of Italy and Germany that united into national states between 1859 and 1871, and I recall having an especially difficult time when the European colonialism of the 1880s ushered in the era of world politics. But he finished with an A in the course.

My blind student had to learn geography in order to understand history.

We are all geographers, after all, from the moment we learn to navigate the playpen or find the bathroom and refrigerator, to the years we explore the neighbourhood on our bicycles and take a family vacation, to the careers we pursue as adults. You cannot argue with geography, as Ambassador Robert Strausz-Hupe liked to say.

Geography is fundamental to the process of true education in that it serves as a springboard to virtually every other subject.

- Why are deserts or rain forests here and not there?
- Why do Asians eat rice and Mexicans tortillas, instead of bread?
- Why did the Europeans discover routes to China instead of the Chinese discovering routes to Europe?
- Why did democracy emerge in Greece and not Egypt?
- How did the colonial powers manage to conquer the world, and how did today's 200-odd countries emerge?
- What is a country, for that matter, and why are some big, rich, populous, and mighty, while others are small, poor, or weak?

Asking such questions opens up a universe of intellectual inquiry.

Students without geographic knowledge are helpless when confronted by adult issues, whether in school or outside of it. Geography is vital to the examination of economic competition, poverty, environmental degradation, ethnic conflict, health care, global warming, literature and culture and, needless to say, international relations.

In short, students are not ready to grapple with important issues until they know the lay of the land!

*(Adapted with permission from “[You Can't Argue with Geography](#)” in Vol. 14, Number 1, 2001 of Common Knowledge, the newsletter of the Core Knowledge Foundation. Dr. McDougall is Chairman of the Foreign Policy Research Institute's History Academy.)*