

# GEOGRAPHY

## *The Neglected Discipline*

By Robert G. Pierson

**I**n recent years the public media have featured a plethora of horror stories describing Americans' lack of geographical knowledge. Unfortunately, the media is simply reflecting the findings measured by numerous universities and geographical organizations across the country. Geography has been largely neglected in America's educational system—with alarming results.

A 1988 survey generated by the National Geographic Society and conducted by the Gallup Organization

revealed that Americans 18 to 24 years old scored lower than all their counterparts in the nine-nation survey. The study was the most extensive of its kind ever taken, testing the geographical knowledge of 10,280 adults in Canada, France, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Sweden, Great Britain, the United States, and West Germany. Out of a possible score of 16, Americans in general averaged 8.6, but 18- to 24-year-olds averaged only 6.9.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the fact that the United States relies heavily on the Persian Gulf for a significant portion of its pe-

troleum, only 25 percent of the Americans surveyed could locate this important body of water on a map. The news media have spotlighted the struggle in Nicaragua almost daily over the past few years. Yet some 45 percent of Americans could not locate Central America on a map, and only about one-third knew where Vietnam was.<sup>2</sup>

### **Lack of Knowledge at University Level**

During the past several years, university tests have revealed the same tragic deficiency. Typical releases

based on these tests read as follows:

"In one major university test, fewer than half of 1,875 students knew that Alaska and Texas were the largest states in the U.S."

"Fewer than 25% of the students tested could name a single African nation south of the Sahara."

"One of every five 12-year-olds in North Dakota incorrectly identified Brazil as the United States on a world map."

"One of every three freshmen at a California university could not locate France on a world map; 75% could not locate El Salvador; and 47% could not find Japan."<sup>3</sup>

These samplings represent a nationwide problem, rather than a condemnation of any specific state or institution.

### Deficiencies in SDA Awareness

The same problem is also apparent among American Adventists. During the past 20 years, I have observed university students from all over the United States display their lack of knowledge about other lands and peoples. One sidewalk exchange went as follows:

American: "Where are you from?"

Australian: "I'm from down under in Australia."

American: "How long have you been here in the United States?"

Australian: "Several weeks."

American: "My, but you've learned English quickly!"

On another occasion one of my Oriental students was asked where he came from. When he replied, "Singapore," the response was, "What part of China is that?"

For close to 15 years, I gave my freshman classes an unannounced map quiz of the United States. The only requirement was to name the 50 states. On the average, students would name 20 to 25 states. Knowing only 10 states was not uncommon, and the all-time low was two states.

The above samplings do *not* represent a lack of ability among Adventist youth, but rather that the system of education has failed them. When given the opportunity to study geography, Americans—including Adventists—do as well as anyone.

### A Paradox

The status of geography in the United States is strangely paradoxical. On the one hand, American geographical journals and organizations are some of the most respected in the world. U.S. cartographers employ some of the most advanced and sophisticated techniques found any-

where, and information about planet Earth is disseminated by one of the world's most highly developed systems of mass communication. In 1986, this mass communication included 3,969 licensed FM radio stations, 1,272 educational FM stations, and 4,887 licensed AM radio stations with 478 million existing radio receivers,<sup>4</sup> as well as 1,342 television stations and 1,645 newspapers.<sup>5</sup>

In spite of all this communication capacity, a variety of recent surveys and polls, such as the one listed above, reveal an alarming lack of geographical information by many Americans. How could this paradoxical situation develop in an enlightened pro-educational milieu such as exists in the United States?

### Why the Decline?

Andrew McNally III, chairman of the board of Rand McNally and Com-

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pany, and the great-grandson of the company's cofounder, Andrew McNally, assessed the problem in an insightful article published in *The Professional Geographer*.<sup>6</sup> He cites several frequently stated reasons for the decline of geography. These include:

1. The disappearance of geography as a discipline, resulting from the blending of geography with the social studies.

2. The failure of Americans to realize the importance of geography due to their isolation from much of the world and their lack of direct contact with peoples of other cultures and traditions.

3. The concept that geography is a tough subject and therefore avoided by many Americans.

McNally correctly questions each of the above assumptions and proceeds to pinpoint a significant portion of the problem. He places the responsibility for the lack of geography education squarely in the hands of professional geographers.

In his article McNally points out the need for American geographers to be more assertive in selling their discipline both in the classroom and to the public in general.

### Recommendations

More specifically, in order to get their message across, geographers need to emphasize three things:

1. They need to place greater emphasis on teaching and recruiting undergraduates for continued study on the graduate level. The profession needs the best possible teachers at all levels.

2. They need to train their geography graduates in the art of teaching geography. It is not enough to simply convey the technical information and hope for the best.

3. Geography needs to be skillfully integrated into the curricula at both primary and secondary levels.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, the situation may be even less hopeful for the future. Very few primary and secondary teachers are adequately trained in geography. Administrators charged with the responsibility of drawing up the curricula also usually lack a background in geography. Compounding the problem is the fact that American Adventist education on the tertiary level is largely lacking in geography. Only one Adventist institution of higher education in North America offers as much as a minor in geography. The others have only a smattering of courses, some of which are taught by teachers from other disciplines. It will be impossible to break the cycle of geographical deficiency unless adequate geography is universally required by Adventist teacher education programs. Inclusion of geography as a required subject in the General Education package of each Adventist college and university is a must. Primary and secondary teachers with little or no geographical training on the K-12 level need more than one college course to prepare them to teach geography. Teacher education courses in geography should be taught by a professionally trained instructor who can inspire the class with the importance and relevance of geography.

### Geography for Teachers

In the United States, geography has not received adequate attention at grades K-12 for much of this century. Teachers who have never been trained in geography understandably have a difficult time conveying its importance and relevance to their students. Furthermore, administrators who lack a knowledge of geography are poorly equipped to assess its value in the educational system. This unfortunate situation has perpetuated itself for many decades.

However, as America finds itself in a

world shrunken by expanding transportation technology and rapid communication, it is faced with the dilemma of "finding itself" in the world. The key problem now is how to break the geography deficiency cycle. Adequately trained teachers are not being produced in significant quantities because the system has not generated a market for them.

In countries where education is the responsibility of the central government, geography has generally enjoyed a recognized position in the educational system. Probably for this reason geography was never lost in the quicksands of social studies as it was in the United States.

### Emphasizing Its Importance

In the United States and other countries where education is decentralized, there is no central authority to decree the importance of geography and to reinstate it in the curricula nationwide at both the primary and secondary levels of education.

In recent years, however, American thought leaders, recognizing the importance of geography, have rallied to draw the nation's attention to this deficiency. Examples of this are the National Geographic Society and numerous universities across the country. Former President Reagan even declared November 15 to 21, 1987, as the first Geography Awareness Week.<sup>8</sup>

In 1989 Geography Awareness Week was scheduled for November 12-18 with the theme: "Geography: Key to

Our Environment."<sup>9</sup> In a decentralized educational environment, this kind of national awareness program is needed to help solve the problem.

Within the Adventist educational system in the United States, one finds the same lack of geography as in the nation at large.

### Geography and Church Mission

Unfortunately, geography has been lost sight of in Adventist education.<sup>10</sup> Few other subjects are as germane and central to the message and mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This centrality is expressed beautifully and succinctly in the book *Education*: "It is acquaintance that awakens sympathy, and sympathy is the spring of effective ministry. To awaken in the children and youth sympathy and the spirit of sacrifice for the suffering millions in the 'regions beyond,' let them become acquainted with these lands and their peoples. In this line much might be accomplished in our schools."<sup>11</sup>

One of the key functions of geography is to acquaint the student with a knowledge of other lands and peoples. Who can do this better than a Seventh-day Adventist teacher who combines the professional training with a deep commitment to Christian service around the world? *The Journal of Adventist Education* editors and authors hope that this issue, devoted largely to geography, will highlight the need for geography education among Adventists. Educational leaders in the church would do well to ponder the

academic and financial significance of a church constituency fully awakened and sympathetic to the needs at home and in the regions beyond. □

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### NOTES AND REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> "Americans Get Low Grades in Gallup Geography Test," News release from The National Geographic Society (July 27, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *The American Geographical Society Focus*, 35:2 (Summer 1986), pp. 32, 33.

<sup>4</sup> *The Europa Yearbook, 1988: A World Study*, Volume II, K-Z.

<sup>5</sup> *The World Almanac*.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew McNally III, "You Can't Get There From Here With Today's Approach to Geography," *The Professional Geographer*, 39:4 (November 1987), pp. 389-392.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Social Education* (April-May 1988), pp. 248-250.

<sup>9</sup> *Geography Education Update* (Fall 1989), p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> Because of the influence of American educators in Adventist education, this neglect has frequently been felt in our schools around the world.

<sup>11</sup> Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn. 1903), p. 269.