

If you know the way to San Jose it helps

Not uncommon in this country is the manner in which a location is described: "Far from the center of California, as the name implies, El Centro is the seat of Imperial County, DOWN AT THE RIGHT HAND, BOTTOM CORNER OF THE STATE AS YOU LOOK AT A MAP..." Apparently, for this local columnist describing the poorest county of the 58 in our most populous state, stating that it is located in the southeast corner of the state is something that was never learned. Oh yes, it should also be made clear that San Bernadino County is the largest in the state, not Imperial, as the writer states.

Another example of the lack of understanding of our geography was the comment of a vice president of a firm with local connections who was visiting a business in the state of Washington. When the sign on the road to the airport appeared and indicated Des Moines, her comment was that she didn't know that Iowa was so close to Washington, not realizing that this Des Moines was

in Washington and not the one located almost 2,000 miles to the east.

Perhaps this geographical misinformation stems from a Rhode Island orientation where it is possible to travel from the Arctic to Wyoming in one-half hour. Or where one can visit such places as Jerusalem, Moscow, Berkeley and Phenix (Rhode Island spelling), and, again, all in less than one hour's time.

But this is really not the case, for Rhode Islanders are little different from the rest of Americans in their poor knowledge of geography. Americans generally get lowest marks when compared with other countries, as was demonstrated by a simple test conducted by the Gallup Poll for the National Geographic Society several years ago. Among the persons tested in nine countries, Americans ranked just ahead of Italy and Mexico but among the 18-to-24 year olds, that group most recently out of high school and college, we ranked dead-last. For a country whose citizens are among the most

traveled and whose students have just gone through one of the most expensive educational experiences, this is disgraceful.

Our newspapers today are filled with maps of Southwest and

Central Asia, with such exotic names as Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan,

Tajikistan and Afghanistan, parts of the world unfamiliar to most until recently, but when Americans can't locate their own country or the Pacific Ocean on a blank world map, then we know that we have a problem.

How this problem came about requires a lengthy explanation, but briefly it comes down to this: Geography was usually required in high school in the early part of the last century, but then we incorporated it into social studies before World War II and geography became nothing more than filling in some blank maps; history became the major focus in these studies, and even though there was never enough time to get into the 20th century, it was taught with even fewer blank maps to fill in, and, finally, geography itself must shoulder some of the blame because it was taught as places, capitals, exports and such unmemorable things to be memorized. It was stultifying.

Today, fortunately, there is significant change. Through the major efforts and money of the Na-

tional Geographic, geography alliances of trained teachers, now more than 15,000, have been established in all of the states. These teachers learn more geography through instruction, travel and study, and they, in turn, teach other teachers.

The kids, in turn, get more and better instruction and they get involved. The nationally televised finals of the Geography Bee, in which more than five million kids have participated, are just as exciting as the beauty pageants as these youngsters dazzle the audience with their geographical knowledge as they vie for the \$50,000 worth of scholarships.

With geography now one of the advanced placement courses that high school youngsters take for college credit; with four states now requiring a year of high school geography to enter the state university; and with a trained and excited sizable number of teachers throughout the country who have an intimate knowledge of geography, the pendulum now appears to be swinging in the right direction. Events in Asia make us keenly aware of our need to better understand people and places. And as a world leader, we need this for ourselves today and for our children tomorrow. ■

Chester E. Smolski is a professor (retired) of Geography at Rhode Island College

Correspondence

CHET SMOLSKI

LETTERS POLICY

Providence Business News welcomes letters from its readers on local business or financial issues or personalities. Letters must be signed, include a daytime telephone number and should be no longer than 250 words. Longer letters may be edited for space restrictions. Send to:

Letters to the Editor
Providence Business news
300 Richmond Street, Providence, RI 02903
they may be sent via facsimile to (401) 274-0670