DEPARTMENT OF STATE

MARCH 2009

Office of the Geographer is

On The Map
Map Quest

Office of the Month

OFFICE OF THE GEOGRAPHER MAKES INFORMATION VISUAL

BY DR. LOWRY TAYLOR

PHOTOGRAPH: ED WARNER
increased dramatically in the run-up to World War II as the Department recognized its relevance to the war effort. At the time, its staff members churned out maps and geographical analyses for the government’s top policymakers.

Today, the office continues that tradition, but long gone are the days of pen and ink. Now, the cartographic process is fully computerized, and maps are disseminated electronically, sometimes even directly to the mass media. The office’s analysts are increasingly being called upon by the Department’s press spokesperson to provide the context and design for a map or an image, such as that of declassified troop movements, illegal logging or mass graves. When NBC’s Ann Curry in 2007 interviewed Sudan’s president, she confronted him with a map produced by the office’s Humanitarian Information Unit and posted on the Department’s Web site only the day before. The map, based on high-resolution satellite images, documented more than 1,600 burned and damaged villages as evidence of the genocide in Darfur.

The bureau’s offices are organized in a way that supports the Department’s policymaking bureaus, but in the mid-1980s, the Office of the Geographer expanded to address problems that did not neatly fit the diplomatic needs of the Department’s regional bureaus—matters such as refugees, human rights, democratization and international environmental concerns. The office also deals with such global issues as peacekeeping, transnational and subnational ethnic conflicts, war crimes, natural disasters and humanitarian emergencies.

The office has undergone numerous transformations since its origins in the aftermath of World War I, when the Department’s earliest geographers grappled with a growing map collection, rapidly changing international boundaries, immigration quotas and the standardization of foreign geographic names. The office’s analysts now provide intelligence support to a wide range of functional policy bureaus and write assessments focused on transnational themes.

Its Geographic Information Unit employs cartographers, boundary specialists and imagery analysts who use cutting-edge software and technology to fulfill the office’s statutory authority to ensure that the boundaries on all U.S. government maps reflect foreign policy standards and are accurate. They also use computerized Geographic Information Systems to do digital mapping analysis that shows spatial trends that give depth to intelligence analysis.

At the negotiation table, the office’s staff work with their counterparts in other agencies to provide real-time, portable visualization tools that can help resolve territorial conflicts. These tools include satellite imagery from classified sources—and Google Earth.

The office’s maps and comprehensive boundary files, now nearly all digitized, are on the Diplomaps site on the classified network and in the Boundaries and Sovereignty Encyclopedia on the OpenNet at http://base.us-state.osis.gov/.

Importance Grows

Though the Office of the Geographer was created in 1921, its size and importance geography has come a long way from memorizing locations and place names. That’s also true for the Office of the Geographer and Global Issues in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research. The geographer of today is a mix of social scientist, field worker, graphic artist and technology wizard, and is at ease in the office environment and remote corners of the world. Add diplomat to the mix and you have today’s geographers at the State Department.
Therefore, its workforce must have skills in spatial and political analysis, and be able to collaborate across agencies and with remote regions of the world.

**War Crimes**

The office’s War Crimes Unit is the U.S. government’s executive agent for information sharing with international criminal tribunals, such as those set up for the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda and Sierra Leone. In this role, it provides documents, imagery and witnesses to the prosecution and defense to support the effort to bring indicted war criminals to justice. For example, in the recent conviction of Bosnian Serb General Radislav Krstić, declassified satellite imagery helped tie the general to the 1995 Srebrenica massacre. The images made it possible to identify the number of original mass grave sites and the secondary sites used by Bosnian Serb authorities to hide evidence of the killings.

The office is now at its largest size since just after World War II, with around 35 full-time staff, including a number of contractors and detailees from such agencies as the Department of Defense, the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, the U.S. Agency for International Development and the Department’s Office of the Global AIDS Coordinator. The office also regularly relies on visiting science and technology fellows to add breadth to its support for science-policy priority issues.

The Humanitarian Information Unit, which focuses on complex emergency response and interagency coordination, has since its inception in 2002 relied heavily on detailees from other agencies. Unit analysts’ foremost task is to aid decisionmakers and partners regarding humanitarian emergencies. The Humanitarian Information Unit, which focuses on complex emergency response and interagency coordination, has since its inception in 2002 relied heavily on detailees from other agencies. Unit analysts’ foremost task is to aid decisionmakers and partners regarding humanitarian emergencies.

The plethora of new technologies, such as cell phones with GPS and the availability of services like Google Earth, bring geography closer to young people, who are exposed to these devices every day.
The Department, he said, remains memo-focused, but, “I hope to help change that and move toward interactive, visual and creative use of maps to impart information and knowledge to better inform decisionmaking.”

Schwartz is also working with universities and other agencies and organizations to promote the global development of what he calls “participatory mapping,” which will provide simple tools for local peoples to map themselves, rather than being mapped by others.

Speaking more generally, he said such jargon as “common operating picture” and “situational awareness” are just other words for maps that display information over time and space.

“It’s just that the tools and means we have to make these maps are now more sophisticated, accurate, immediate, transportable and interactive,” he said. He also said he feels the plethora of new technologies—such as cell phones that use Global Positioning System satellites and the availability of services like Google Earth—bring geography closer to young people, who are exposed to these devices every day. Thus, he hopes those who are growing up without being taught geography will nevertheless be able to find their way.

The Department, he said, remains memo-focused, but, “I hope to help change that and move toward interactive, visual and creative use of maps to impart information and knowledge to better inform decisionmaking.”

Schwartz is also working with universities and other agencies and organizations to promote the global development of what he calls “participatory mapping,” which will provide simple tools for local peoples to map themselves, rather than being mapped by others.

Speaking more generally, he said such jargon as “common operating picture” and “situational awareness” are just other words for maps that display information over time and space.

“It’s just that the tools and means we have to make these maps are now more sophisticated, accurate, immediate, transportable and interactive,” he said. He also said he feels the plethora of new technologies—such as cell phones that use Global Positioning System satellites and the availability of services like Google Earth—bring geography closer to young people, who are exposed to these devices every day. Thus, he hopes those who are growing up without being taught geography will nevertheless be able to find their way.

The author is deputy chief of the Humanitarian Information Unit.